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Shadows on the Snow.

BY B. L. FARJEON.

PART I.

HOW THE SHADOWS APPEARED AT WARLEYCOMBE, AND WHAT THEY SAID AND DID.

OUR story commences in a quiet lane in the garden of Devonshire—in a narrow, quiet lane, where, in the summer, the flowered hedge-rows on either side shut out from view the pretty homesteads in their rear, and where, in the winter, the naked branches threaded the air with snow lines fantastically, and the sharp, thin twigs were whitely lighted up with pearl-drooping eyes of icicle. A quiet, narrow lane, luxuriantly dotted in the spring with violets and forget-me-nots, and in the drowsy summer, when the hum of bees could be faintly heard in the tangled bush of honeysuckle and wild roses, dreamily delicious with fragrant odors. A quiet, narrow lane, at the end of which came suddenly and quaintly into view a shallow reach of a noble river, with a taste of the salt sea on its lips, where the clear waters lay calmly in their rustic shelter, while on its bosom glowed the shadows of its gardened banks. A quiet, narrow lane, wherein a thousand new graces perpetually unfolded themselves, and where Nature made holiday in every season of the year.

It was the evening of a sharp, wintry day in December, so near Christmas that the sun threw a golden mantle on its holly-crowned head, and welcomed its advent with a fiery splendor. The elm that had stood outside Stephen Winkworth's house for more Christmases than Stephen Winkworth could remember, blushed crimson sympathetically, and the tips of its branches caught the light of the glowing sun, and there imprisoned it until the greyer shadows usurped its place. The light touched the form of Stephen Winkworth himself, as he stood at his door, watching the declining day, and it lingered lovingly at a window above his head, at which a girl sat motionless, looking out upon the scene. Stephen Winkworth was by no means a pleasant figure in the landscape, and did not show in his face any sign of gladness. The happy season which brought joy to so many hearts brought none to his; for in all the three hundred and sixty-five days of the year he held no one in tender remembrance. Bitter, morose, and discontented, he stood on his threshold at war with the world and with himself. "Stephen the woman-hater," his neighbors called him; they might have added man-hater also, for all the love he bore his sex. His spiritual influence for unkindness was very strong. It was enough to make one bad tempered to look at the surly wrinkles in his face, and the people, without knowing why, felt an inclination to snarl at each other when he was in their company. He was not an ungainly man, and was still in the prime of life; strong and sturdily

built was he, and blessed with good health; fairly well-to-do, also, from a worldly point of view. But with all these advantages, he had never been discovered in any act of kindness, and not a human being in the world would have felt inclined to say: "God bless him!"

Only on one occasion throughout the year did he of his own free-will associate with his neighbors, and that was Christmas-eve. And only in one house in all Devonshire would he have been welcomed, and that house was Warleycombe Lodge, the residence of Reuben Harrild. Harrild and he had been friends in their youthful days; and in one of their boyish confidences had pledged themselves never, if circumstances permitted, to spend Christmas apart from each other. That Stephen Winkworth had not broken his promise came from no active exercise of sentiment; it was more a mechanical than an affectionate offering to a friendship which now existed but in name. The house of Reuben Harrild was within view, and Stephen could see the reflection of the dying sun in each pane of glass that shone like a fiery eye upon the landscape. No softening influence came upon him as he gazed upon this solemn splendor. With deep-set lines in his face, and with form immovable, he stood like an image carved in stone—stern, impassive, relentless, and unfeeling.

Toward him approached two persons, with that brisk motion of the body which betokens enjoyment of surrounding and inward influences. He was not conscious of their approach, but the girl at the window above saw them the moment they appeared around the winding path in the distance, and a look of eager love, of love without hope, of love in which there was pain, flashed into her eyes. With parted lips, and a flush on her usually pale face which did not come from the sunset's glow, she watched their forms grow larger and more distinct as they emerged out of the deeper shadows. From the younger of the two came a cheerful greeting to Stephen Winkworth.

"Good-evening, neighbor. Fine weather for this Christmas!"

The speaker was a good-looking man, some five-and-twenty years of age, William Fairfield by name. He was a farmer in the neighborhood of Warleycombe, and although comparatively a new man in the locality, had been cordially welcomed upon his own merits into the society of his fellows. The farm he now owned had been bequeathed to him by a relative who had stood to him in the position of a parent; and William Fairfield, who, at about that time, was looking around for a pursuit, thought he might as well try whether the life of a country farmer would suit him. It threatened at the outset not to suit him at all; he was naturally daring, impulsive, and ambitious; and after a trial of a few months he had serious thoughts of seeking his fortune elsewhere, when he was thrown into the society of Reuben Harrild's daughter, Laura. Between the two an attachment had sprung up sufficiently strong to bind William Fairfield to Warleycombe had it been infinitely less attractive than it was, and he was now regarded as permanently settled



"HEAVEN BLESS YOU, MY CHILD," MURMURED STEPHEN, GAZING FONDLY AT HIS DAUGHTER.

upon his farm. William was accompanied by a singular-looking individual, scarcely five feet in height, but with a head so enormous that it might properly have belonged to one of the sons of Anak. Attached to so short a body, the effect produced was nothing less than startling. This man was an institution in the neighborhood; had come many years ago from nobody knew where, and had gradually worked himself into the confidence, and gained the love and esteem of every man, woman, and child for twenty miles around, with the single exception of Stephen Winkworth. It was suspected, from a certain guttural accentuation in his tones—especially noticeable when he was speaking rapidly—that he was of German extraction; but nothing more was really known of him than that his name was Bax, that he was a doctor, and that he practiced his profession as much for love as for gain. He was not rich, but he always had enough, and he never accepted a fee from those he suspected of not being able to afford it. He was welcomed everywhere, and by everybody. He took an interest in everything. Women spoke of him as “dear Doctor Bax,” and husbands were not jealous to hear; young men in love pressed him into their confidence; and young women whispered their little troubles into his ear. He had a kind word and honest advice for all, and never seemed tired of doing good gratuitously.

Now, one would have thought that the mere sight of such a man would have been sufficient to induce some sign of cheerful recognition. Not so thought Stephen Winkworth; he evidently regarded the little doctor as an intrusion, and did not care to conceal his feelings in the matter. But as for Doctor Bax, bless your soul! sour looks had no more effect upon him than they have upon the Sphinx, and he returned Stephen’s surly recognition with a smile genial enough to have melted all the ice in every water-butt in Devonshire.

“Fine weather, sir!” exclaimed the little doctor, rubbing his hands briskly, and sniffing the air with most intense enjoyment. “It’s finer than fine weather, sir; it’s glorious weather, glorious! Smell it.” Here he gave another vigorous sniff. “Take off your hat, and bow to it;” and, taking off his hat, he bared to the fresh air a poll as smooth as a billiard-ball, and as polished as looking-glass; you certainly could have seen your face in it. “Fine weather, sir! By the Lord! if one could live in such weather for fifty years, he would not be a day older at the end, and we doctors would have to move to another planet. It is life, sir, life—the true Elixir Vitæ! If Old Parr had had such weather as this, he would have lived to a thousand. Not a day less, as I am a man and a doctor!”

Stephen gazed upon the rhapsodist with cold, contemptuous eyes. Far different from William Fairfield, who followed the doctor’s words with sparkling looks, and gay, assenting gestures.

“We live in a glorious climate,” proceeded Doctor Bax, with thorough enjoyment; “idiots abuse it, because it is the fashion to abuse it, and idiots will do whatever’s the fashion. A glorious climate! Show me a finer. Such a day as this is perfect and appropriate. Christmas would lose half its charm if it were not for the snow, and the ice, and the life-giving cold air. We breathe in youth in such weather as this.”

“You are a fortunate man, doctor,” said Stephen, with a little cynical laugh.

“Fortunate! Yes, I am fortunate,” quickly, and somewhat gravely, responded Dr. Bax; “but you mean in some particular way?”

“No,” replied Stephen, in slow, measured tones, which formed a wonderful contrast to the impetuous utterances of the little doctor, “I mean in a general way. Fortunate in being able, or pretending to be able, to find so much good in things that are obnoxious to others.”

“Fortunate, for instance,” rejoined Doctor Bax, gently, and with reverence, “in being able to find ‘tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.’”

Stephen Winkworth disposed of the gentle reproach by a scornful motion of his hands.

“I find the evening cold, and chilly, and damp; favorable only to rheumatism and bronchitis. I see nothing fine in it.”

“Nothing?” inquired Doctor Bax, with an air of anxiety.

“Nothing,” was the positive asseveration of Stephen Winkworth.

“Well—well,” said the doctor, rubbing his forehead, “that can’t be your fault. It is an unfortunate inheritance not to be able to see good in things; but you were put in possession of it without being consulted, and therefore you are not to blame. The perplexing point is,” continued the doctor, musingly, “who is to blame? You can’t throw it upon your father or mother, for they could not have known anything about it. We are all born with differently shaped heads; we are not accountable for that. There is a great deal in the shape of the head we come into the world with. You see, if a child was born with two tongues, he could not help speaking double, could he? Rather a comical idea, that. Ha—ha—ha!”

Although the doctor laughed heartily at the notion, and was as heartily joined by William Fairfield, Stephen Winkworth did not appear to see the comicality of the idea.

“You call yourself a philosopher, I should not wonder,” he said, disdainfully.

“If philosophy means contentment with things as they are,” said Doctor Bax, rubbing his forehead again, “then I say, yes, I am a philosopher.”

“From which I gather,” said Stephen, slowly, dwelling on his words, “that you have never experienced a heart shock that turned your blood from its natural currents, and diseased it. You are a happy man, contented with yourself and with the world.”

“I am happy,” returned Doctor Bax, with humbleness, “and contented with the world; but I have seen misfortune, and I thank God for it.”

“That is your cant,” sneered Stephen, “and of a piece with other human hypocrisies. You thank God for misfortune, and take credit to yourself for pretended humbleness. You bless outwardly what I curse outwardly and inwardly. It is wise in you—for the world smiles on you, while it turns its back even upon my shadow.”

“That is the view you take of it,” said Doctor Bax, flying to his new philosophy for consolation. “It is not your fault—it springs from your unfortunate inheritance, and I pity you for it.”

“Bestow your pity where it is more welcome. Look you, Doctor Bax—who is the braver, the more honest and genuine, of we two? You, who cringe beneath misfortune, and thank God for it; or I, who rebel against it, and curse it? As I do, as I shall, until I die! And so the world may go and hang itself, for all the love I bear it; and I might go and hang myself, for all the love it bears me! That’s my philosophy. A tougher one than yours, you’ll admit.”

“A tough one indeed,” said the doctor, shaking his head sadly; “but I lay no blame to you for thinking thus, and I take no credit to myself for being different. That I am the happier of the two——”

“Of a piece with the rest!” interrupted Stephen, with a contemptuous laugh. “It would be giving the lie to your professions if you failed to remind me that you occupy the sunny side of the road.”

“No—no!” cried the doctor, remorsefully, catching the subtle taunt conveyed in the reproach. “I had no such meaning in my mind, believe me. What I meant to express was sympathy for you; but I am the veriest bungler! Not that I give you right either; you are as wrong as a wrong-headed man can possibly be. Here is our young friend”—indicating William Fairfield—“engaged to be married to the sweetest girl in Devonshire——”

Stephen Winkworth interrupted him again.

“The sweetest, because she has a fair face.”

"The sweetest," said Doctor Bax, warmly, "because she is good and pure. Suppose William Fairfield thought as you do! A pretty kettle of fish that would be! And nice ideas yours are to carry about with one at Christmas-time! I declare seriously, I am sorry for you."

"It is true, then, that you are going to marry Reuben Harrild's daughter," said Stephen, turning to the young farmer. "You love her frantically, of course?"

"I love her as she deserves to be loved," was the simple reply.

"Tricked by her pretty face!" sneered Stephen. "Take care that your doll does not deceive you! Watch her; never let her out of your sight! But be as wary as you may, she is no true woman if she does not play you false."

"Do not answer him, William," said the doctor, checking the hot reply that rose to the young man's lips. "He does not know what he is saying; he, of all others, should not doubt the purity of woman's love."

"Love!" exclaimed Stephen, with sudden passion; "a fiction! a sham! a delusion! It is bought and sold. Believe in it, trust in it, center all the earnestness of your soul on it; and wake up one day from your dream, and see your idol defaced, dishonored, lying at your feet!"

"No—no," said Doctor Bax, earnestly. "He does not mean it, William. Do not believe that he means it. He knows that it is no delusion—he knows that it is all good and holy. Why, William, think of his daughter—"

"Hush, man, for God's sake! Do not let her hear you!"

As Stephen, thus imploring, cast a frightened glance at the window above, the white face of the girl disappeared. Neither he nor his companions had been conscious of its presence there.

"Dear—dear!" said Doctor Bax, as he and William walked away; "what an unfortunate inheritance has fallen to that man's lot! Come, Will, let us have a race to the house. Whoever gets there first has first kiss from Laura."

Off they set, running as fast as their legs could carry them, towards Warleycombe Lodge, where they arrived in a state of laughing breathlessness.

Meanwhile, Stephen Winkworth, with the same bitter feelings at his heart, stood watching their departing forms, without a thought in unison with the sacred peacefulness of the evening. The shadows deepened, and the reflection from the dying sun's couch of fire grew darker and darker every moment; and as the night stole on, Stephen's mood kept pace with its increasing sombreness. But a wave of gentler feeling passed over his face at the sound of a low, plaintive voice from the house.

"Father!"

"My child," said Stephen, in a tone so strangely soft and sweet that it was hard to believe it proceeded from the man who had within the last few minutes conversed with such harshness.

He turned to go in, but to his side had crept a figure so wan, so pitiful, that unaccustomed eyes looking upon it for the first time would have filled with grief at the unhappy sight.

A girl, dwarfed and misshapen, with a face on which a poignant grief had so firmly set its seal that an expression of gladness upon it seemed almost an impossibility. A girl scarcely eighteen years of age, humpbacked and deformed, and with little of the grace of youth about her to denote that she was in the springtime of life. One mark of comeliness was hers—her hair, which was soft and golden—but as it lay against her ghastly skin, it seemed to mock her with its beauty. As the man looked down upon her crippled form, a shudder of remorse passed through him, and he stooped to press his cheek to hers caressingly.

"Well, my lass," he cried, with an attempt at light-heartedness; "we must make ourselves fine to-night. Reuben Harrild's house will be filled with gay company, to welcome Christmas forsooth! As though Christmas could not go on well enough without their tomfoolery."

Nothing but a sigh answered him for a time. Presently: "Father," said the girl, "I wish you would not speak so lightly of Christmas. It is the only holiday we have in all the year. It is a good time."

"No time is good for me while I see you thus," said he, with deep emotion, as he smoothed the hair from her face. "I have no holiday while you are suffering."

"Yes," she answered, dreamily, "it is wearisome—wearisome. But I am not quite unhappy, father. It cannot last forever. I sometimes feel contented with my pain when I think of by-and-by; and Christmas seems to belong to it. It is a good season."

"I could think so, child, if I saw you, as I see others, enjoying the time as they do. All seasons would be good to me—ay, even to me, whom all men hate——"

"No—no, father!" she pleaded.

"All seasons would be good to me if I could see you as I see others of your age, happy and light-hearted—if I could see you as I have seen you in my dreams, as I should see you but for the blight that fell upon my life when you were—I thank God for it—too young to remember. Forgive me, child, for causing those tears. Let me kiss them away."

"It cannot be helped," she said, with a kind of pitiful humor, casting a glance of compassion on her stunted shape.

"Doctor Bax said I could never come straight again. Not all the king's horses, nor all the king's men, can make Humpty-Dumpty straight again. But I might be worse, far worse. I have my reason; I can see, and hear, and speak; all these are blessings of which I might have been deprived. When I look at the sky on such a night as this, I feel that my life is not as dark as it might be."

It was dark enough to the morose man as he stood by the side of his maimed child, fighting with his soul.

"I could be happier—I know I could be happier, if you and the world were different to each other—if you did not regard it as your enemy. But that will never be, father, will it?"

"No, child, it will never be. I cannot play the hypocrite and lie to you."

"Yet you are good and kind to me. Why should you love me so dearly and be bitter with all others? All men and women are not bad. See, father, there is my angel!"

She pointed up to a large, grey cloud, with white, fleecy wings, which her imagination had quaintly fashioned into the figure of an angel.

"I never saw him so beautiful before. He is at his best because it is Christmas. Say that Christmas is a good time and make me happy."

"Christmas is a good time, child," he said, doggedly.

"No—no! not like that! From your heart—I want you to say it from your heart. You are silent. If I were to say that I suffer more—far more than you can imagine—that my heart is torn to pieces with vain yearnings—you would strive perhaps to bring some gladness into my days. Ah, forgive me!" she cried, in an agony of remorse, as a spasm of pain escaped him; "I am ungrateful—ungrateful! You are all that is good to me—all that is kind. But I suffer so! I am truly unhappy." She rocked herself to and fro, and sobbed. "Sit by my side, father. I must tell you my secret, or I shall die!"

In silence he sat upon the door-step by her side, with face almost as white as hers. When she had sobbed herself into a quieter mood, she spoke again.

"Father, I am very much deformed, am I not?"

"Not to me, darling."

"No, not to you, for when you look at me, your eyes are in your heart. But I am, in reality, very ugly, very uninteresting, deformed, and a cripple. No person in the world, seeing me once, would care to see me again. I know from myself. I do not care to look for a second time upon ugly and uninteresting things. It is very sad."

The commiserating tone in which she spoke of her misfortunes was very touching to hear.

"I am not like any other girl I have ever seen. There"

is Laura Harrild now; she is very—very pretty. When I look at her, I feel as glad as when I see the early primroses peep out of the ground, telling me that spring is coming.”

Stephen's features assumed an anxious expression at the mention of Laura Harrild's name.

“If you were to ask me my idea of perfect happiness, I should answer, Laura Harrild. She is young, beautiful, and good—and she loves, and is beloved. Oh, my heart!”

There was such anguish in the poor girl's voice, that every nerve in Stephen's body quivered in sympathy as he supported her head upon his shoulder.

“Do you guess my secret, father?” she whispered.

“To my sorrow, dear child.”

“I cannot help it. I have struggled against it vainly, feeling how hopeless it is. I have always loved him, miserable girl that I am! I do not know how it came, except that he is so brave and strong and handsome, while I am nothing but a poor, ugly cripple. Is life worth having, I wonder, in such a shape as mine? If I were somebody else, and saw such a creature as myself, I should look down with pity upon her, and ask whether she would not be happier if she were dead. I have seen girls, ragged, and without a shoe to their feet, and have envied them because they were strong and had straight limbs, and were free from pain—which I seldom am, unless I am asleep.”

“They suffer much,” said Stephen, attempting to draw consolation for her from the misery of others; “they are often without a meal or a bed.”

“But they are free,” she cried, “they are free, and I am a slave! Though they have not a shilling in their pockets, their hearts are sometimes light, and they smile and enjoy. I have seen them—I have seen them! What happiness there must be in poverty! You are a rich man, father.”

“I have money, child. It is yours to spend as you wish.”

“Money cannot buy love. Money will not make me different from what I am, and it cannot bring sunshine into our house. Are all homes like ours? There is no light in it; it is desolate and deserted, and it has never been otherwise within my remembrance. You and I are like two hermits, shut out from the world. In what way has this come, and must it be always so? Surely there is something better in life than my experience has shown me. Ah, yes, there is something better in it. There is love in it, which I shall never—never have!”

She was speaking to herself now, while he sat watching her, humbly and in silence. Morose and churlish as he was to all others, here he was a slave; and had he possessed the power, he would have laid his heart in her lap, could it have insured her a day's happiness.

“To-night is Christmas,” she resumed, “and we shall go around to Mr. Harrild's house, and see so many young people dancing, and laughing, and playing forfeits, while I shall sit in a corner glaring at them, like the envious old witch I have read of in fairy stories. I am quite as hideous, I know; and it is natural and proper that they should not come and pay court to me, as they do to each other. And I deserve it, father,” she exclaimed, her mood suddenly changing, “I deserve it for reviling the world and everybody in it, as I am doing. I deserve it for having bad and uncharitable thoughts at such a good and sacred time as Christmas—for it is a good time, after all, is it not?”

No words can express the entreating earnestness with which she strove to urge this belief upon him. It could not fail to soften the hard man's heart, and he said, gently:

“It is a good time, child.”

And with his hand touching her neck lovingly, they went into the house together.

* * * * *

At Beuben Harrild's there was assembled on this evening as merry and light-hearted a company as ever met within four walls. Genial faces everywhere; smiles and cheerful looks on all sides, from old and young; every person on his best

behavior, ready to shake every other person's hand, with as much amiability as can be expressed by the pressure of palms and fingers. And if such a thing as truth exists, hearts accompanied the pressure. As for duplicity, double-dealing, suspicion of motives, artful maneuvering for selfish purposes, such qualities were purely mythical, good enough to put color into dreams, but utterly imaginative—almost comical to think of—as to any part they might play in the business of life. The business of life! What am I thinking of? Business, to the rightabout! It is Christmas-eve, and the world is pleasant to heart and eye, abounding in sweet, and loving, and charitable thought.

But, I am bound to confess it, there was heart-burning in the kitchen. For in that region of shining stew and sauce pans, in whose polished surfaces the genial reflection of a jolly time was clearly visible, Samuel Meldrum (the man-servant of the establishment) had, by the merest accident, come plump upon Kitty Simons (the maid-servant of the establishment), and had discovered her in the act of being kissed beneath the miserable pretense of a piece of mistletoe, by a retainer of low degree, who, being especially recommended by Samuel Meldrum, had been temporarily engaged to assist in the general joy, and had thus basely betrayed the trust reposed in him. Now, Samuel Meldrum regarded the kisses of pretty Kitty Simons, both from and for, as his special prerogative, and most particularly and solely within his department at Christmas time. This act of the temporary retainer was clearly, therefore, an act of treachery, and as such was regarded by his patron, who, after treating the treacherous dependent to a “piece of his mind,” glared at Kitty with eyes in which love and jealousy were plainly depicted. Pretty Kitty, busy at the dresser, whither she had demurely walked after the kiss under the mistletoe, was, of course, entirely unconscious of the state of Samuel Meldrum's feelings—which was the reason why she furtively watched him from beneath her dark eyelashes, and wondered when he was going to speak. But Samuel's moral dignity was hurt, and he preserved silence—more from not knowing what to say than from any other cause.

“They're playing games up-stairs,” said Kitty, taking the bull by the horns; “such games!”

Samuel only grunted.

“They're playing,” said Kitty, slyly, “I love my love with a A, because he's amiable, and amusing, and a angel; and I hate my love with a A, because he's aggravating, and absurd, and annoying; and his name ain't Alexander, and he comes from Aberdeen, and I took him to the sign of the Ax and Anchor, and treated him to apples and anchovies.”

“And I don't love my love with a We,” retorted Samuel, goaded into a full sense of his wrongs by the pretty maid's attempt at reconciliation, “because she's wicious, and wile, and a wixen; and I hate her with a We, because she's vulgar, and a wiper; and her name ain't Wenus, and she comes from Wandiemans Land, and I took her to the sign of the Venomous Wampire, and treated her to vinegar and water.”

The retort caused Kitty to smile to herself more slyly than ever; for the next best thing to a declaration of love from a man you have a liking for is a declaration of jealousy, and there was no doubt that Samuel was in a desperate condition. The temporary retainer, driven by Kitty's distracting airs into a state of over-bubbling love, listened to this quarrel with secret pleasure, and beguiling Kitty under the mistletoe, attempted to snatch from her tempting lips a repetition of the temporary bliss which had fired his soul. But this time he reckoned without his host. Kitty—sly puss as she was!—knowing that Samuel was near, pretended to struggle with the poacher, crying out with affected indignation, “How dare you, sir! What do you mean by it? Oh, Samuel, Samuel! Save me!” Whereupon Samuel, his jealousy melting in the warmth of this appeal, flew to the rescue, and caught Kitty in his arms—where she lay panting, her pouting lips in a direct line with the mistletoe, and looking altogether so lovely and bewitching that— Well, he did what you would have

done—kissed her once, and again, and again, and would have gone on for there is no saying how long, had not Kitty ran away to hide her blushes and delight.

Every room in the house had such a bright look about it that there was no mistaking the time.

Had Father Time himself suddenly appeared with his opera-hat under his arm, and (being an airy old gentleman) with nothing else worth mentioning on his old bones in the shape of garments, for the purpose of telling you that he had made a mistake with his glass, and that he was six or seven weeks too fast or too slow, you would have snapped your fingers at him. Not Christmas! A nice thing, indeed! As if you did not know better! As if every saucepan in the kitchen did not know better! As if the very sparks flying up the chimneys did not know better! Not Christmas! Ask Mrs. Ramage. Who was Mrs. Ramage? Mrs. Ramage was a Large woman, with a Large mouth, and a Large nose, and Large eyes, and Large limbs, and a Large way of asserting herself which there was no resisting. And in Mrs. Ramage was merged Mr. Ramage, who was a little man, with a little mouth, and a little nose, and little eyes, and little limbs, and such a very little way of asserting himself that no one took the slightest notice of him. If by chance he was spoken of, it was as one who had vested the whole of his right, title, and interest in and to human life in the wife of his bosom; who, indeed, had parted with it so thoroughly and completely that it might be regarded as a sum which she added up, subtracted from, multiplied, or divided, at her pleasure.

Not Christmas! Why, here was Mrs. Ramage, this tremendously solemn and magnificently large woman, actually laughing, and beaming kindly smiles upon poor little Mr. Ramage, who hopped meekly about her, and bobbed his little head in ecstasy at her affability.

Not Christmas! Ask the Woys and the Wymers, of Messrs. Wymer, Woy & Wymer, the celebrated firm of attorneys and solicitors which transacted all the legal business of the district. The firm originally was Wymer & Woy; but a female Wymer, sister of the senior partner, having in her own particular right become possessed of a sum of money which the firm was anxious to pass to its credit, would only consent to invest it on the condition that her name was added to the firm. Being a strong-minded and bony old maid, her condition was accepted, and the title thenceforth was Wymer, Woy & Wymer. All the members of the firm were long, lank, and lean, and grew, as did their parchments, more shrunk and shriveled every term. Life to them was in a small way made up of happiness and sorrow, sympathy, disappointments, love, trials of affection, charity, and such-like trifles; but in a much larger way it was made up of law. They talked nothing but law; they knew nothing but law; they breathed nothing but law. They played the game of existence (as though it were really a game) with cards of law, and they played it so skilfully that they never missed the odd trick. Yet even they looked frostily pleasant, and thawed a little under the genial influence of the time; dimly recognizing that kindness at such a season might possibly be an enactment of some old law of humanity which it would be well for them not to resist.

And if there was a shadow of doubt on the subject—if any misguided person still entertained the most infinitesimal particle of disbelief as to the fact—he had but to look at the face of Laura Harrild, and the thing was settled. There was nothing extraordinarily handsome about Laura—she was simply a dear, lovable woman, gemmed with the graces of a happy, innocent youth. Well-looking and well-formed, with a pure mind and a loving heart, a pleasant gladness rested on her face, and shed its influence on all around her. Such women are the roses of the world; happy the man who has one blooming in the garden of his life!

“To think,” said Doctor Bax, as he sat dandling on his knee a privileged, curly-headed youngster, “to think of those two children going to get married in three months!

Why, Mr. Harrild, what on earth will you do without her?”

The person addressed, a sober-looking man of fifty, gazed thoughtfully at Laura and William, who were sitting among a group of young people, laughing and chatting gayly.

“Dear—dear!” continued the doctor; “three months! And to-morrow we shall be looking back to it, and saying it was only yesterday that they were married. Life, indeed, is nothing but a breath of wind.”

“I beg your pardon,” interposed Mr. Wymer, who was close by, with the other two members of the firm; “I did not quite catch it, doctor. You were saying——”

“That life was nothing but a breath of wind,” repeated Doctor Bax.

“No such thing, sir—no such thing,” exclaimed Mr. Wymer, warmly. “Life a breath of wind, indeed! Pooh-pooh, doctor! you know nothing about it! If everybody took such a light view of it— I beg your pardon; you smiled.”

“It sounded like a joke,” said Doctor Bax; “taking such a light view of it, you said.”

“I never joke,” said Mr. Wymer, solemnly; “and if I did, I hope I should know myself better than to select a subject so serious. I repeat, if everybody took such a light view of life, what would become of all its most important relations? What would be the use of making marriage settlements in favor of a breath of wind? What would be the use of making one’s will in favor of a breath of wind? What would be the use of actions at law, writs of ejectment, pleas, interpleas, rules nisi, criminal prosecutions, chancery suits, and insolvencies? What, in short, would become of law?”

“That is no breath of wind, I grant you,” said the little doctor, good-humoredly; “it is a grim reality. But I spoke metaphorically.”

“I beg your pardon. You spoke——”

“Metaphorically.”

“I thought I was mistaken in the word,” returned Mr. Wymer. “My dear doctor, you cannot be in earnest. Metaphorically! Of what practical use is it to speak metaphorically? Speak legally, and you are all right. Speak legally, act legally, live legally, die legally, and you can go to the other world with your title-deeds in your hand, and take possession. What I find fault with in people nowadays,” continued the lawyer, illustrating his points with his forefinger, “is, that they diverge from the proper course of life. They are dreamy, sentimental, metaphorical, unpractical, and unbusiness-like. Now, there is no dreaminess or sentimentality in law. You *must* be business-like and practical, or you will get the worst of it. You must be wide awake, my friend, when you deal with law.” And Mr. Wymer emitted a dry, chuckling laugh, as though he were in the habit of dealing with many people who were unbusiness-like and unpractical, and not sufficiently wide awake, and who were therefore always getting the worst of it.”

“But the uncertainty of the law,” Doctor Bax ventured to remark.

“That’s the charm of it,” replied Mr. Wymer, rubbing his hands pleasantly with the geniality of his theme.

“I beg your pardon,” interrupted Doctor Bax, purposely imitating the old lawyer; “you said that is the——”

“Charm of it.”

“Its uncertainty?”

“Exactly. You never know where to have it. You may study it for a hundred years, and it may trip you up, after all. It is wonderfully and beautifully complex.”

“There are cases which have lasted sixty or seventy years, are there not?” asked Doctor Bax.

“More, sir, more,” replied Mr. Wymer, gleefully. “What could better illustrate the law’s amazing ingenuity, its inexhaustible fertility, than such cases? Think of the study, the speeches, the learning, the arguments, that have been used in a simple suit. Think of the briefs——”

"The fees," the doctor put in, with a knowing look.

Mr. Wymer, Miss Wymer, and Mr. Woy looked at each other, smiled, and softly smoothed the palms of their right hands with the fingers of their left, a sign of satisfaction they were in the habit of unconsciously and simultaneously indulging in when they were discussing a more than usually agreeable topic.

"The fees," said Mr. Wymer; "yes, they follow, of course, for every laborer is worthy of his hire; and we are laborers, after a fashion."

"How on earth," asked Doctor Bax, with a spice of maliciousness, "did the world ever get on without lawyers?"

"It never did, sir; Biblical records prove it. In the patriarchal days, men were born with legal minds, as they are now. Abraham bought land, and was most particular concerning the trees, down to the very borders of the property. Then look at Jacob and Laban. Do you mean to say they were not lawyers? If Jacob lived in these days, he would reach the wool-sack, if he were not a Jew."

"He tricked Laban out of wool enough for a thousand wool-sacks," said Doctor Bax, making his escape quickly, to avoid the torrent of invective that would have been poured upon him for his satire. Contact with Wymer, Woy & Wymer somewhat jarred upon the tender heart of the little doctor; but a peep at William, standing at a window, with his arm around Laura's waist, was enough to bring his spirit again into perfect harmony with the season.

The lovers were looking out upon the night. The snow-flakes were falling lightly, and as far as eye could reach a field of purest white was spread before them. The window was in a recess, shut off from the room by heavy curtains, so that they were almost in seclusion. William was speaking to Laura in soft, loving tones, and her pure, truthful face denoted how lovingly she was following his words.

"Three Christmases, my darling," said William, "dating from last year. What a contrast! Last year you and I had not seen each other, and next year we shall be in our own cozy nest. Before I saw you, I did not know what happiness there is in restfulness of spirit. It was impossible for me to settle myself down; now I would be this, now I would be that; something within me always whispering, 'Move on; don't stop where you are.' For months and months I thought of emigrating to the Australian colonies, and I used to devour the news of every fresh discovery in the other part of the world. I dreamed night after night of tremendous nuggets, almost too heavy to lift, and would wake in a rage to find it all a delusion. At length I quite mad up my mind; there was nothing here to bind me to the old land; I would go out to the new. Away I posted to Woy & Wymer, and gave instructions to sell my farm; they soon found a purchaser, and the conveyance was drawn up. Stephen Winkworth was the man who wanted to buy it, but happily I did not sign it away to him, for at that precise time, my darling, I met you, and I thought, 'Why be in such a hurry, William? And when I discovered that you loved me'—he drew her closer to him—"away to the four winds of heaven flew all ideas of parting with my land. I had found my happiness here."

She looked up into his face shyly and timidly.

"Does never a thought come into your mind, William, that it might have been as well for you if you *had* gone away?"

"What a question, dearest! Asked to try me! Well, it is a small trial. Put me to a severer test, and see me smiling at you with perfect trustfulness—as I do now, loving you, believing in you, though all the world were against me."

"What I mean is, it might have done you good. You are naturally impulsive—"

"Yes," he interrupted, with rapid shakes of the head, "impulsive, self-willed, and obstinate."

"I will not hear you say that, for it is not so. You are naturally impulsive, bold, manly, fearless."

He interrupted her again with a happy laugh. "Two sides to the shield. But eyes of love can't see clearly."

"And now you are going to settle into a quiet, humdrum life, perhaps not exactly suited to you."

"That is just what Stephen Winkworth said. When he went to the lawyers', with his money in his hand, sixteen hundred sovereigns—and I told him I had altered my mind, and did not intend to sell my farm, he called me rash-headed; said that I did not know what was good for myself, that the bargain had been made, and I could not draw back from it. And there the money is to this day—at least, so old Mr. Wymer is telling me—and there are the deeds ready for signing. All I have to do is to go to the office, and write my name, and pocket the sixteen hundred pounds. But were it a million times as much, it would not tempt me, if it threatened to part us; for your love, darling, is worth all the gold in the world to me, and I do not intend to forfeit it by any act of mine."

"If you have found your happiness," she said, presently, after a delicious pause, "which I pray that you have—I will try that it shall be so, believe me—I have found mine. Tell me, William, what made you so eager to go to the gold colonies?"

"They seemed to offer the most tempting lookout. But there *was* another reason. A friend of mine, who had been a scapegrace in his younger days, had gone over, and reformed, and made lots of money. He wrote so eloquently about the mode of life there, and its freedom, and the gold, that he fairly turned my head."

"Your friend," said Laura, and hesitated.

"Yes?" questioned William.

"Was he simply wild and thoughtless?"

"He was worse. He committed a great wrong."

"In what way, William?"

"He forged his father's name—"

"Oh, William!" she cried, in a voice so fraught with pain that he held her to his breast and asked her, in alarm, what ailed her. She recovered herself quickly, and, laughing hysterically, begged him to proceed.

"Well," continued William, "he forged his father's name, and the forgery was detected. The old gentleman gave him means to carry him to Australia, and he escaped punishment. But his father, in settling the claim, was almost ruined."

"And afterward?" said Laura.

"The father died, and the young scapegrace reformed, and became a first-rate member of society."

"It is a melancholy story," said Laura, in a tone of sadness.

"Stephen Winkworth and poor Alice have just come in," said William; "go and bring Alice here."

"In a minute or two. Let us sit quietly for a little while. I like to be away from the lights and the people when you are with me; and here in this little nook we can see everything without being seen."

William needed no urging, and they sat, happy and still, for five rapid minutes.

"How beautiful the snow is!" said Laura, nestling close to her lover. "The flakes float down from heaven like feathers from the wings of the angels."

"Laura," exclaimed William, looking intently through the window, "what is that outside? There! Do you not see it moving?"

It was the shadow of a man, lurking about the house. Laura's heart sank within her, and she turned as white as the falling snow.

"Evidently some skulker," said William; "I'll go out and see who it is."

"No—no, William," implored Laura, clinging to his arm, "do not go! I beg, I implore you, do not go!"

"My little wife that is to be," he said, gazing at her in tender concern, "this is the second time to-night you have startled me without cause. It is right I should see who

that man is; if he is in want, I can relieve him; if he is here for no good purpose, I must get rid of him. He'll not hurt me, dear."

"No—no—no!" she exclaimed, with strange earnestness, still clinging to his arm; "you shall not, you must not, go. And see—it is gone! It was only a shadow, after all. We have been standing here from the lights so long, that we have grown fanciful."

Leaving him, she walked into the room toward Alice Winkworth.

Many of the guests gazed at the contrast presented by these two girls. One, lithe, supple, graceful, pleasant-looking; the other, deformed, maimed, and sickly. A world of tenderness was expressed in Laura's face as she leaned over Alice's chair.

"I am glad you are here, Alice. You are looking so well!"

"I am as well as I ever hope to be," returned Alice, sadly, but with no sign of petulance.

Laura smoothed Alice's hair with an affectionate and tender hand, and selecting a flower and some green leaves from a vase, arranged them tastefully among the bright curls.

"You have the most beautiful hair, dear. You should always wear flowers in it."

Alice took the kindly hand, and softly pressed it.

"William sent me to you, Alice."

"Yes!" said Alice, eagerly.

"He wants you to come and sit by the window."

A glad light passed into the sick girl's face, as she arose and walked with Laura toward the curtained recess. Before they reached it, Laura whispered, with an air of anxiety:

"Will you do me a favor, Alice?"

"Oh, yes, if I can."

"I have something to do which will take me away from the room for a few minutes. Sit and talk with William till I come back. I shall not be gone long."

Alice nodded acquiescently, but not without surprise—more from the nervous, anxious manner in which the request was made, than from the request itself. They entered the recess, and with a smile at her lover, Laura led Alice to his side, and turned to leave.

"Where are you going, Laura?" asked William.

"I must attend to the guests, Will; I shall be back presently."

William was not satisfied. With the usual selfishness of lovers, he begrudged every moment that Laura devoted to others. But the deformed girl was gazing wistfully at him, and his nature was too considerate to treat her with indifference. Seating himself by her side at the window, he saw for the second time the shadow of a man lurking about the house.

"By Heavens," he muttered, "there it is again!"

For a moment he thought of running out into the white plain and accosting the man, but he was restrained by the reflection that Laura might be vexed with him for doing so.

Other eyes than his were fixed upon the falling snow. Reuben Harrild had left his guests for a while to their own devices, and had retired to his study, where he sat gazing dreamily out of the window. Old memories were passing through his mind, causing him to look older than he was. Some lives, filled with vain strivings and mental struggles, are prolific of wrinkles; others, free from those wild storms which are too frequently self-created, scarcely raise a furrow on the face. Too often, alas! are the pages of life blotted with tears; and Memory, as she scans the record, lives over again, with bitter brevity, the shedding of each tear. Around Reuben Harrild hovered the ghosts of past joys and grief—overshadowed all by one pale specter whose intangible presence raised frowns upon his face and shame and sadness within his heart. Nor was his gloom dispelled by the appearance of the child whose pure spirit shed the light of happiness upon his life and home.

He drew her to his knee, and, with her head pillowed upon his shoulder, they sat for a brief space in silent communion.

"Did you come to seek me, Laura?" he asked.

"Yes, father."

"I shall lose you soon, dear child. Doctor Bax asked me to-night what I should do without you. I do not know; I shall be like a lost man. But I must not repine. It is the way of life—to love and lose!"

"You will not lose me, father. Our home will be yours, and we can live together always if you wish. Do not speak so sadly. If we love and lose, memory remains."

"Remains to stab us," he replied, with a shiver, "to bring shame and sorrow to us, to the last day of our lives."

She was too well acquainted with his mood to continue the theme, and she strove to lead him to gentler thoughts, with so much love and tenderness as to partially succeed.

Pressing his lips to her cheek, he said, fondly:

"You are like your mother, child. She never failed to win me back to cheerfulness."

"It is good to hear that. Father, I do so wish I could be brave, and speak to you what is in my mind."

"You may say what you please, dear child, on every subject——"

"On every subject!" she interrupted, with sudden earnestness.

Some meaning in her tone, unexpressed in her words, put him on his guard, and he answered, gravely:

"On every subject but one, which you are aware must never be mentioned between us. You know me, Laura; you know how deeply I love you. No father could better love a daughter; and I have striven most earnestly to do my duty to you. Therefore, dear child, you must continue to obey me in this, as you have done in all other things, and be to me what you have ever been—a child I can love without shame or reproach."

As he spoke, she saw outside the shadow of the man upon the snow, and, drawing her father hastily away from the window, she stood between him and the night. Supposing that by this action she wished him to rejoin his guests, he passed his arm around her, and led her out of the study; saying, as they walked slowly along the passage:

"I have been thinking of what I know is in your mind. But I would rather risk my life than my honor. A stab at the one may be cured; at the other, never. Dear to my heart as you are, Laura, if you committed an act which reflected dishonor upon our name, I could never—never forgive you. Nay, dear child," he said, kissing the pale face which was raised pleadingly to his, "do I not know how impossible it is for you to do a wrong? I only wish to prove to you how irrevocable is my resolution. Every man has a skeleton in his house, and I must not grumble at mine. I would like to lock it in an iron safe, and throw the key into the sea——"

"What—what!" cried Doctor Bax, who, coming into the passage with the household cat upon his shoulder, heard the last words of the incompleted sentence. "What do you want to throw into the sea?"

"The key of the safe in which I would like to lock my skeleton," replied Reuben Harrild, with a smile.

"Trying to get away from your skeleton!" exclaimed Doctor Bax, tickling the ears of the cat. "Pooh! rubbish! As if you or any man could escape it! No—no, my friend, it will stick to you while you can draw breath, and, as likely as not, it will follow you into the other world. Just now you have a house full of invisible bones. I warrant you every man's skeleton has stepped out of its cupboard to accompany its owner to your Christmas party, and that there are a score of them jostling up against us, if we could only see. For curiosity, now," he said, motioning Laura and her father to the half-opened door of the room where some of the elderly people were playing cards, and most of the young ones playing forfeits and making love, "look at Stephen Winkworth there, sitting by himself—what a skeleton he has got! A perpetual day and

nightmare! It never leaves him. It perches upon his shoulder, like the bird of ill-omen we read of:

"Leave my loneliness unbroken!
Quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart,
And thy form from off my door!—
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore!'"

And Stephen's daughter, poor child! has not she a skeleton? Heaven help her! her's is the saddest of all, for it stands at the portal of a girl's brightest hopes, shutting out the light. Look at little Mr. Ramage—Mrs. Ramage is his skeleton—and is not *she* an awful one, hanging around a man's neck? And you, my dear," he said to Laura, "you have your skeleton, and I have mine—here—here!" and he smote his breast theatrically, and upset the cat.

"Your skeleton, Doctor Bax," said Laura; "why, what kind of a one can that be?"

"A tearing, staring, horrible, malicious, wicked skeleton!" cried the doctor, so loudly that the eyes of every person in the room were turned upon him. "A fearful, hideous, monstrous, hobgoblin kind of skeleton. I will tell you what it is—in confidence, so that nobody shall hear!" (he raised his voice to its highest pitch). "I love you and you are going to marry another! If it be not true, may this kiss I am going to give you under the mistletoe be my last!"

But Laura darted away, and the little doctor, pursuing her, turned all the card-tables topsy-turvy, and set the whole room in an uproar.

Oh, but it was a merry Christmas party, despite the skeletons, and little Doctor Bax was the life and soul of it! Had an account been kept, it would have been proved that he kissed every female in the house at least half a dozen times over. He was, indeed, a privileged Don Juan. Even Mrs. Ramage submitted to the salute; and as for Miss Wymer, she stepped under the mistletoe like a willing lamb, and smacked her lips after the operation.

There were two or three cozy little rooms on the lower floor of the house, in which the guests found themselves almost by chance if they happened to stroll out of the larger apartment where the chief merry-making was carried on. In one of these an hour later, were Stephen Winkworth and his daughter.

"Take me home, father," said the girl. "I am weary of this; I want to be at home."

"I thought you wished to be here," he returned, wistfully. "It is gayer than our dull house."

"I know it is, but how can I be merry seeing what I see?" she exclaimed, fretfully. "I am like a baby crying for a toy which somebody else has got."

"Child," whispered Stephen, bending low, "if William Fairfield loved you, you would be happy."

"Do not speak of it, father," sobbed Alice. "It can never—never be! Love cannot be bought."

"But it can be won and lost," he muttered, in a tone so low that his words did not reach her ears. "If it can be proved to a man that the woman he loves is false——" He stepped a few paces from his daughter, and closed the door to prevent interruption. "My girl's happiness may hang upon the discovery I have made to-night. Shall I let the opportunity slip from me? It was destiny that led me from the house an hour ago, to see—what? To see this immaculate, spotless woman who is engaged to marry William Fairfield, in the arms of another man, and to hear her make an appointment with him at midnight. At midnight, by the Lord! when no third person is nigh to witness her disgrace!" A low, scornful laugh floated on the air, unheard by the weeping girl. "This fair creature, so outwardly honest, this paragon of modesty and virtue, is like the rest of her shameless sex, false—false to the backbone! Oh, my ladies, shame upon you! Not for me, whose life has been blasted by your treachery, not for me to spare you! I would whip your false bodies with whips made of your own delicate hair; ay, every mother's daughter of you!"

There was a bitter, biting ring in the man's muttered tones, inspired by memories which was torture to recall.

"But for my daughter," he continued, with a glance at the bowed, distorted form, "he should marry this paragon, and discover her treachery when it was too late. It would be of a piece with the rest, and would add one to the many. But my child loves him! Oh, God! grant her some little recompensation for her life's torture, give her a recompense for her long misery!"

Despite his unpitying mood, the prayer came from his heart.

"You are suffering for my sake," said Alice, raising her head, and noting the signs of trouble in her father's face. "I strive for the future to bear my pain alone. But I hoped this night was to be so happy——"

"It may be yet, child. I love you—I love you." And he pressed her passionately to his breast. "I would lose my soul for you!"

"Hush, father!" she cried, putting her hand to his lips.

"I would, as truly as I live, to secure your happiness. We will not go home yet; we will wait another hour."

As they entered the passage, they saw Laura pass swiftly from the house, with tears in her eyes, and William Fairfield looking after her with an expression of annoyance. Stephen was about to address him, but checking himself for a moment, allowed Alice to enter the room where the company was assembled. Then he said:

"You don't seem over-well pleased, William Fairfield."

"What business may that be of yours?" returned William, in an ungracious tone. "Attend to your own matters, and leave me to mine."

"Hard words these, lad, upon Christmas-eve," said Stephen, with no show of anger; "but perhaps I was in the wrong. I beg your pardon."

Humbleness did not sit well upon the man; but it was so unusual an exhibition in him that it stung William into remorse.

"It is I who should beg pardon, Mr. Winkworth. There is my hand. Do not refuse it."

"Not likely I should refuse your hand, my lad, though many another man's I might." He paid no heed to the look of surprise with which William received this expression of good-will. "Can you spare me a few minutes? I have that to say to you it may be well for you to hear. No, not in the house, with prying eyes about. What I have to say to you is private. Come into the open air."

He led the way, and in silent wonder William followed him. The snow-fall had ceased, and had left a thick, soft carpet upon the earth. The moon was shining forth, and the heavens were bright and pure in the light of the glorious prospect beneath them. As far as the eye could reach every object was mantled in loveliest white. The tall trees stood like white sentinels of the night, erect and watchful. The sloping roofs sloped whitely down to the eaves, and the chimney-pots reared their heads whitely to the sky, the cowls upon them resembling the shrouded heads of the white monks bending in prayer.

The solemn peacefulness of the beautiful night impressed its loving lesson upon both the men, and for a little while they were silent. William Fairfield was the first to speak.

"Do you wish to speak to me about my farm?"

"No, lad. Of something of far greater importance to your welfare. Though, for the matter of that, I am ready at any moment to fulfill my share of the bargain. If you go to the lawyer's to-morrow, you will find the money ready for you. You have but to sign your name."

"Mr. Wymer has told me so a dozen times; but I have no intention now of selling my land. You must be a well-to-do man, Mr. Winkworth, to allow sixteen hundred pounds to lie idle for so long a time. I should not mind being in your shoes."

"So far as regards money?"

"Yes; not in any other way particularly."

"I am better than well-to-do; I am a rich man. If you, with your youth, and strength, and talent, had my money, you could hold up your head with the best in the country."

My daughter will inherit every penny I possess. Inherit! It is hers now, while I live. She will bring a rich dower to the man who marries her."

"I trust she will marry one worthy of her," said William, with a sharp look at Stephen.

"My child will bring what is better than beauty to him who wins her love. With riches, she will bring a faithful heart; with riches, she will bring a soul stainless as an angel's."

There was no mistaking the meaning Stephen wished to convey, and William Fairchild paused long before he could command himself sufficiently to speak with coolness.

"This is not the first time to-day that you have uttered words to which I should not listen. What do you mean by them?"

"Fair and soft, my lad. It is your interest I have at heart."

"Speak plainly, then."

"I will. Would you—would any man with his eyes open—marry a woman who is playing a double game—a shameless wench—"

"By Heaven—"

"Hold off your hands, and listen to me. I could be your father, William Fairfield, for the years I bear. Be still and hear me out. From the depths of my own life I have that to say, which, if you are not utterly blind, will prove to you how false fair things may be. When I have done, you can judge for yourself."

His stern impressiveness made its mark. William Fairfield did not reply, but stood with his back against a tree, clenching his hands, and beating his foot impatiently against its trunk. They had wandered some little distance from the house, and the notes of merriment from within fell but faintly upon their ears. Otherwise, not a sound but that of their own voices broke the stillness of the night.

"You know what I am," Stephen said; "you know the estimation in which I am held. If any man, woman, or child, in all Devonshire were asked who in all Devonshire was most disliked, most hated, most shunned, the reply would be—Stephen Winkworth. If any dumb animal in Devonshire desired to show its dislike to any person more than all others, it would be to Stephen Winkworth. Children turn from him; beggars avoid him; not a human being has a smile of welcome for him. Were he to be deprived of his wealth, and were he lying parched and starving by the roadside, no one out of love would, for his sake, give him a cup of milk—no one out of compassion would offer him a bed of straw to lie upon. Were Stephen Winkworth to die to-morrow, no one but the undertaker would attend his funeral, and even he would be glad when the job was done. Not a tear but those shed by his daughter would fall upon his grave."

The picture he had drawn was true. He spoke in his usual bitter tone, with a full consciousness that it would be futile to endeavor to avoid the penalty he had earned and invited.

"Such is my fate," he continued. "I do not complain. I have brought it upon myself, and I must bear it. But it was not always thus with me, William Fairfield."

"It was always thus within my remembrance," said William, resentfully.

"You speak the truth, lad. Yet I once had a happy home—I once had friends. Friends!" he echoed fiercely. "Had I my will, I would send the word to hell, to burn out its false meaning! It was one of these friends—vultures—lies—call them what you will, who made me what I am!"

He took off his hat and bared his head to the cold wind. In this man's heart was raging a tragic fire, the fury of which time was powerless to dim. The memory of an early wrong was burning within him as fiercely as when it was first perpetrated. For years had he been hugging it close, fanning it into a blaze which death alone could extinguish.

"Years have passed over me, like the rest of men, and

left their marks upon my frame. But fresh within me, as in the hour it was done, burns the wrong which set me against my fellow-men forever and forever. When I forget it, may a palsy strike me dead!"

He stooped and took up a handful of snow, with which he bathed his fevered head. No sign in Nature sympathized with him. The white-orbed maiden shed her pure light upon his form; the soft white snow enveloped his feet; graceful devices in tree and hedge met his eyes whichever way he turned. He stood alone, in antagonism with the symbols of loveliness and purity by which he was surrounded.

"You, in the heyday of youth, you, with the dream of life spread before you woven in bright colors, as it once spread before me—you love. All men do, at some time in their early youth. Each man, in his time, sees a woman, whom he sets before him as an idol, and falls down and worships, poor, blind fool! as though she were heaven-born. This woman to this man is a saint; angelic virtues dwell in her; she is clothed in a celestial armor of innocence, truth, and simplicity. I in my youth came within this influence. I in my youth set up within my soul a painted sham, a beautiful lie, and worshiped it with all the strength of my manhood. I have read books wherein woman's love is described as a divine emanation—wherein a niche in a woman's heart is said to sanctify a man's life, and make him better and fitter for the life to come. Woman's love! What woman loves as a man too often loves? Her nature is too petty to comprehend the infinite tenderness of a man's devotion. The man sees upon the face of the woman he loves, a smile which Nature gave her—a smile of heavenly sweetness, which intensifies the adoration in his soul; and this trick of the features, which she practises in his absence a hundred times a day, he believes to be a heart-welcome to him, and for him alone. I, who before my marriage went courting as you have done to-night, would often meet her with such a smile upon her beautiful face, and my heart would laugh within my breast as the sunshine of her eyes fell upon me. This smile, thought I, is the outcome of her love for me, and me alone; the tenderness which I beheld in it is the soul of love, and it is I who have given it birth. Thus I interpreted the magic silence of her greeting, and endowed it with spiritual life."

Beneath the spell of this better remembrance, his voice grew softer.

"She was all in all to me; she was my life, my hope, my prize in the world's lottery—the richest, dearest prize that ever fell to man's lot. I was always a scheming, money-making man, but after I knew her I did not yearn for wealth for myself—I yearned for it for her. Every fresh success I gained was doubly good, because she would share it. I would rub my hands gladly, and thank God I succeeded, for her sake. I whispered her name for luck if I entered into a new speculation. With her image in my heart, every step I mounted in the ladder of life brought me nearer to Heaven. I took this piece of clay, this image of dust, and I fashioned it, and planted it, and beautified it. I filled her face with innocence, her eyes with love, her heart with faithfulness. My devotion gave music to her voice, sanctity to her touch. And I loved her, I loved her as man never loved before!"

There was such a depth of tenderness in the man's voice and action that William Fairfield, forgetting for a time his own happiness, impulsively moved to him, and would have taken his hand in pity; but Stephen repulsed him, and continued:

"We were married. There is a heaven upon earth for some men at one period of life. Many of us can remember a few weeks or months which shine out from the past as though they belonged to another and a happier life. I look back to the first months of my wedded life, and marvel at myself. It is not often that I am stirred to emotion; but when I think of the glory of happiness which was mine during that brief space, and look at my home as it is now—shunned, deserted, cold, and joyless—I am lost in miserable

wonder. I had a smile for all men then—ay, even for one whose name would blister my tongue were I to mention it—for one the very thought of whom drives my blood from its natural channels, and inspires me with a maddening thirst for everlasting revenge!”

In his passion he raised his hand and struck the tree, as he would have struck his enemy, had he stood before him.

“He was my friend, and he sat at my hearth like my brother. He was my friend, and was a witness of my love and happiness. He was my friend, and I lauded him to my wife and sung his praises in her ear in our moments of confidence. He was my friend, and he betrayed me. Curse his soul forever and forever!”

Again he struck the tree, and waved his bloody hand defiantly to the beautiful clouds.

“I will hunt that man through all the worlds. Whatever may be the life we live when this is done with—in whatever sphere or shape I meet him—he shall expiate the blight he cast upon me and mine! I pray that the power may be given me! I have prayed for it on my knees! But for that thirsting hope, I should not believe in immortality!”

The crimson blood dropping from his wounded hand upon the snow seemed to William Fairfield a fateful witness to the curse of the wronged man. Gazing upon it in fascination, a lurid light floated before his eyes, distorting his outward and inward sense of sight.

“My wife bore me a child—a daughter—perfect in form and feature, beautiful as the day. This lovely and wondrous creature opened out to me a new world of which I had hitherto no conception. Higher and holier thought than that by which I had hitherto been animated began to stir within me; a spiritual sunrise dawned upon my soul. I declare that I never returned home and saw my darling in her mother’s lap, asleep, or drawing nourishment from her bosom, without being impelled to bless God for his goodness. Even as her little fairy fingers would entwine themselves around one of mine, so did my love for her entwine and grow about the roots of my heart. You would scarcely believe, William Fairfield, were it not for my assurance, that this exquisite baby beauty—straight-limbed, bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked—and my daughter Alice are one. But for me she might have been the flower of Devonshire. It was I, her father, who made her what she is, who have deprived her of life’s best seasons, and who, if love’s light do not shine upon her, have condemned her through all her days to a cold and cheerless winter. Let me recall the fatal day which led to my act of madness. I had left my home on a matter of business, and was to be absent only twenty-four hours. It was the first night I had passed out of my house since my marriage. Why did not my horse fall down with me and kill me, instead of bringing me back to the home I had left honored and happy? But what some men call fate, others chance, others destiny, ordained that I should live and grapple with my misery. For when my journey was over, and I reached my house, my heart pulsing with tender anticipation, I found that my wife had fled—had fled with him I called my friend. I learned that she whom I loved faithfully and truly had betrayed me; that he whom I trusted with my soul had played the Judas. No letter was written to guide me to this conclusion. My wife was gone, and that was enough; my friend was gone, and that was enough. I had not been in my house five minutes before the truth flashed upon me, as might a picture suddenly revealed. For a moment I was dazed and stunned; then came the despairing reality. The past years spread out before me like a map, and every glance and word that had passed between us came to me with a new signification. Her love had been a simulation, a cheat; her heart had never been mine. She had been to me a living lie, and all a woman’s artifice had been employed to conceal the truth. Too well had she succeeded. What would you have done, William Fairfield, had you been stricken with such a blow? What would you

have done had you found your life’s happiness thus suddenly burned to ashes upon your household hearth?”

He did not wait for a reply, but went on:

“The thoughts and memories which clung about me during those few moments would make an epic. Amidst them all, one picture struggled to the foreground. I saw in my fancy the face of my wife lying upon the pillow in the early morning—a face of child-like, angelic beauty—a face which, could an artist paint, and call it innocence, would immortalize his name through all ages. She had fallen asleep in my arms but a few hours before, with words of love upon her lips. I gazed upon her with a heart full of worship. I saw her face, and it was heaven to me. But her inner life was hidden from me; and now that it was laid bare in all its naked deformity, faith, love, religion, belief in human goodness, fled from me affrighted. I was as one suddenly and unnaturally maddened. Infuriated, I looked around and saw her child lying in her cot—her child! She opened her eyes and smiled upon me, and as in that innocent smile I caught the reflex of her false mother’s beauty, I raised her in my arms and dashed her to the ground!”

The memory of the terrible act raised thick beads of perspiration upon his face; and again, in a wild, reckless manner, he scooped up a handful of snow and scattered it over his head.

“I scarcely remember what followed; I do not know whether I eat, or drank, or slept; I only know that I fled from the house, with the intention of pursuing them day and night. From that moment my life was compassed by but one intense, maddening desire—to overtake and kill them. I was soon upon their track, and I flung money about like a madman, but still with an instinctive method in my madness. I followed them from place to place, through England, out of England into foreign countries, and back again. Hearing that I was in pursuit, they schemed and baffled me. I was always a day too late; I reached every spot in which they tarried in time to hear of their departure from it. But they could not forever escape me; I knew it—I felt it; fate was on my side, and would bring me to them as sure as there was a heaven above us. Every sign that made itself visible to me—in human face, in clouds, in trees—bid me pursue and kill them, and I never faltered, never wavered in my resolve. Pictures formed themselves for me in the clouds—in the plains as I dashed past them in the train or carriage; in the full sunlight as it gleamed on clear waters; in the night, as it shadows the darkness around me—pictures which imaged false wife and friend crouching before a desperate and dishonored man. Blood was in the air, in the fields—it swam before my eyes, and made me oblivious of all else.”

William Fairfield shuddered at the vehemence of the man’s speech, and almost imagined he saw flying through the air the dark shadows of the picture drawn by Stephen.

“At length I came upon them. When I had lost trace of them, and was standing in doubt as to which way to turn, their faces flashed upon me one night at a railway station. Despite all warning cries, I jumped with a triumphant laugh upon the step of a carriage as the train was moving away. I did not think of my own danger as I was whirled along—I only thought that *they* were there, and that I must get to them, if I had to fight my way through a hundred deaths. The window through which I had caught sight of their faces was far in front of me, and with frantic impatience I worked my way along the side of the train. How I escaped being dashed to pieces was a mystery which some persons would call a providence, but which I recognized as the working-out of a sure retribution. It was not long before I reached the window of the carriage in which they sat, and peering in, I saw them nestling side by side. Never could I forget the moment when in the glance came mutual recognition. I tore at the door like a wild animal, but it was locked, and all my

strength was powerless to open it. I shouted—I raved—I was truly mad; and all the while their white faces—they were alone in the carriage—glared at me, convulsed with fear. Even at that dread time the beauty of my wife stabbed me, and I groaned as though a poisoned dagger had been thrust into my heart. It infuriated me the more, and I renewed my efforts to tear open the door—in vain. The engine was before me, and almost on the thought I found myself upon it, struggling with the engineer, who strove to prevent my mad purpose. I remember nothing more. A sudden crash—an upheaving that heralded the violent ending of the world—the flying of a myriad fiery particles in the air—and then, oblivion. When I recovered my senses I heard that a terrible accident, inexplicable to all but me, had occurred, and that my wife and her paramour were killed, with a score of other persons. Upon earth I was never to see their faces again."

At this moment William, looking toward the house, saw for the third time the mysterious shadow on the snow. In some unaccountable way it inspired him with unreasonable resentment, and nothing but the strong interest he took in Stephen's story would have deterred him from pursuing it.

"When I arose from my bed of sickness I was a changed man. I had tasted the sweetness of life, and it had poisoned my blood. I closed my door upon all my former friends and associates; I closed my heart upon all humanity. The shadow of death was hanging over my house—for oh, William Fairfield! when in my despair I had dashed my baby beauty to the earth, I had not killed her, but I had maimed, deformed her beyond all mortal cure, and she grew into what you see her now. She does not know that it is I who inflicted this bitter grief upon her. Mercifully it is hidden from her, as it has been hidden from all others until this night. It was supposed that she met with an accident for which no human hand was accountable; but I, her father, made her what she is. I, her father, wrecked her young life upon the rock of my despair; and I, her father, hour after hour, day after day, bear within me the seeds of a remorse so strong and agonizing that I would tear myself limb from limb could I atone for the blight I have brought upon my child."

The night had grown very still; no sound of merriment floated from the house. The shadow had disappeared. As William noted this, there stole into his heart a suspicion which made him shudder.

"Do you wonder now that I am morose, sullen, uncharitable? Do you wonder now that I shun my fellow-men—that I hate them all, scorn, distrust them all? But not to excuse myself have I spoken. Take warning that you are not betrayed as I was betrayed. It is the soul, not the face, of a woman that constitutes the happiness of man. If you ask why I have told you my story, I may in some part truly answer that it is to save you from a fate similar to that which fell to my unhappy lot."

"To save me!" exclaimed William.

"Ay," returned Stephen; "you love Laura Harrild's face as I loved the face of my wife. She is fair and beautiful—as was my wife. Learn from me that every fair woman is alike in this—that she so thirsts for admiration that the love of one man will not suffice her."

"You wrong them—you wrong them," murmured William.

"Believe so, and dream your dream till it is too late. This woman that you adore plays love and devotion to you when you are together; gives you honeyed words when you and she are alone; smiles upon you, presses your hand, yields to your embrace—she does all this, I warrant; and yet to-night—"

"To-night!" echoed William, looking around with a bewildered air.

"This very night," said Stephen, in a tone hushed perhaps in compassion for the misery depicted in the young man's face, "this very night I saw her clasped in another man's arms—"

"You lie!" cried William, in an agonized voice. "You lie! As there is light in heaven!"

"I speak the truth. By my child's life, I swear it!"

It was a solemn oath solemnly uttered, and it was accepted as direct testimony by the younger man. He held up his hand mechanically in a pitiable appeal for silence, and Stephen obeyed the motion. In the brief few moments that ensued, all the glory of the night faded away in William Fairfield's sight. The moon lost its brightness, the clouds their beauty, the white snow its purity. Stephen's whispered defilement had defiled the place and season. Yet a duty had to be performed—his manhood had to be vindicated. But first he would make sure; perhaps he had mistaken the purport of Stephen's accusation.

"Repeat," he said, in a set, dogged tone, "and briefly, what you have already said concerning Laura Harrild."

"Two hours since, I saw her yonder," said Stephen, in measured tones, pointing to the spot where William had seen the shadow, "pressing a man to her heart with as fond affection as false women can show. You can best say whether that man was William Fairfield."

It was true, then. He had not mistaken the meaning of the accusation. But two hours since. What was he doing at that time? With an effort he collected his thoughts. It was at that very time he had seen the shadow of the man on the snow, and had called Laura's attention to it; and she had implored him not to go out, and had then left him for fully half an hour. For what purpose? To meet her secret lover, to weep and smile over him, to yield to his embrace. Had not Stephen seen them? This man, whom all the world condemned and looked upon with aversion, had proved his truest friend. Utterly blotted from his memory was the pledge he had given to the woman of his choice: "Put me to a severer test, and see me smiling at you with perfect trustfulness, as I do now, loving you, believing in you, though all the world were against you." He looked vacantly into Stephen's face.

"Have you anything more to tell me?"

"You will not be pleased to hear it; but you should know, for it may lead you to evidence that can not be shaken."

"Say it, then."

"I heard your fair woman make an appointment to meet her man an hour after midnight, behind the house."

William staggered against the tree. An appointment at midnight! His love, whom he had believed to be as pure as she was beautiful. Oh, shame—shame! What Stephen said was true. All fair and beautiful women were alike; the love of one man cannot suffice, they trick and lie to their lovers' faces, and laugh at them behind their backs. In what way did his manhood call upon him to act? To go to Laura and proclaim her shame in the midst of her gay company, and then fling her from him forever? Should he in this way openly disgrace her? No, he would watch first; this night he would play the spy upon her, and satisfy himself if Stephen's words were true. If they were, and if at midnight this false girl met her lover secretly, why, then—

But he could think no further. A dozen times his thoughts carried him to this point, and there he stopped, dazed and confused. He glanced at Stephen Winkworth. Was it possible that he should ever grow like this man—hated by and hating all! Love had made the world beautiful to him: if love were false, in what or whom could he believe?"

If love were false! Was not the proof strong enough? Already, in his heart, love's pure spirit was defiled.

"Oh," he groaned, clenching his hands in agony, "oh, Laura—Laura! How could you thus deceive me?"

He had judged her. Weak as he was, he had condemned her. The first whisper of unfaithfulness—it mattered not from what lips—had been to him a proof of her guilt.

But he would watch to-night. To this, amidst such confused wandering, his mind was settled; and, so resolved, he moved mechanically toward the house.

"Don't grieve too much, my lad," said Stephen, as he walked by William's side; "she is not worth it. It is hard to bear; but it is better now than after."

"Be silent!" exclaimed William, moodily. "You have told me to-night that which may blast my life."

Yes; this man had poisoned the well which had sweetened his existence. This man had made him doubt.

He met Laura in the passage. Uneasy at his long absence, she had been looking for him about the house, never thinking that he had been out in the cold night for such a length of time.

Her face lighted up gladly as she stepped toward him. Could he not see that there only purity and innocence dwelt? Could he not look into her truthful eyes, and see the reflex of her stainless soul?

No. Doubt and jealousy had blinded him. Maddened by what he had heard, he pushed rudely by her, and then, with sudden remorse, stooped and kissed her, despising himself the next moment for the impulsive tenderness.

She drove back the tears that had welled into her eyes, and, laying her head timidly upon his shoulder, nestled fondly to him.

"I have missed you ever so long," she said, sweetly, "and poor Alice has been asking after you so anxiously, that she must have been afraid you were lost."

"Laura," he said, with a fierce passion in his voice, "do you love me?"

"You frighten me, William," replied the girl, shrinking timidly from him.

He observed the action, and misconstrued it.

"Answer me," he said, sternly. "Do not shrink from me, or evade my question! You know I love you, do you not?"

"Yes, William."

Every sharp word he spoke to her wounded him as though it were a dagger's point. He was conscious of the suffering he was inflicting upon her by his own pain in the infliction, but he set his teeth close, and did not flinch.

"You know how perfectly I love you, Laura. You know the hold you have upon my heart. You know that I had better be dead than live in the belief that you loved me, and discover too late that I had been deceived. You know this, do you not? Answer me."

"I believe it," she answered, with trembling lips.

"And now, answer me again," he said, solemnly; "do you love me?"

"Yes, William," she replied, with an appealing look.

"Honestly, purely, without deceit?"

"Indeed—indeed, it is so. Oh, William, what change has come over you?"

Did this content him? No. The doubts that haunted him were phantoms that played about every word she uttered, and bore it to his sense with distorted meaning. What had Stephen told him? In another man's arms not an hour ago! Shame—shame!

"I suppose," he said, with a quiet bitterness, "it is the usual way in which girls answer their lovers."

"William—William!" she cried, her sobs now breaking into a paroxysm.

He was frenzied with love and jealousy, but he could not be entirely indifferent to her emotion. That she was false he had proof in words, but not yet in deed. He would wait for this confirmation, and then would decide how to act. In this spirit he strove to soothe her; and although she was almost heart-broken, her sweet, loving nature conquered, making excuses for his altered mood, and after a time she looked up through her tears and smiled.

Reuben Harrild's Christmas parties always broke up early. Some of the merry-makers had far to go, and the weather had to be taken into consideration. Upon the stroke of ten, his guests prepared to trudge or be driven to their respective homes.

The evening had been a pleasant one, and each one wished his neighbor a merry Christmas and a happy new year. Even the Woys and Wymer's, thawed into geniality, shook

hands cordially with all sorts of people; and as for Doctor Bax, there was not a person in the company who did not behave as though he were in a raging thirst, and mistook the little doctor for a pump.

"The annoyance of it is," said Doctor Bax, as, his face beaming with good-nature, he tied a cravat around his throat, "that everything must come to an end——"

"I beg your pardon," interposed Mr. Wymer, sententiously, "not everything."

"No?" queried Doctor Bax.

"No. There is the law," said Mr. Wymer, with an air which proclaimed, That is eternal.

"Of course, except the law," said the doctor; "that will go on forever. Apart from that, however, there is always to me something of sadness in the last stages of a pleasant experience; but it is pleasant, too, to look forward to other pleasant experiences to come. Then life has its duties. As Mr. Wymer would say, there is the law to look after." —Mr. Wymer nodded complacently—"which returns the compliment by looking after us. However, we have nothing to do with law to-night."

"I beg your pardon," corrected Mr. Wymer.

"Have we, then?" asked Doctor Bax. "In what way?"

"The law of good will and kindness," said the lawyer, with a slight color in his parchment checks; adding, in apology: "It is not against the law to remember it at Christmas."

This sentiment was received by the little doctor with beaming smiles.

"Well-said, Mr. Wymer, well-said; but it is not against the law to remember it at all times."

"I referred only to Christmas," said Mr. Wymer, guardedly.

"Well, be it so. It is good, then, to feel that the law of kindness and good-will reigns to-night, at least, and that when we wish each other a merry Christmas and a happy new year, the words are not uttered unmeaningly."

With many more good wishes, the party was about finally to break up, when Doctor Bax took a small cotton bag from his pocket, and opening it, held it out to the company.

"For the poor," he simply said.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Wymer, looking into the bag, which happened to be a blue bag.

"For the poor," repeated Doctor Bax.

"Whose poor?" asked Mr. Wymer, judicially.

"Mine—yours—God's!"

Mr. Wymer's face instantly lost its judicial aspect.

"Pardon me," he said, dropping a coin into the bag; and Doctor Bax's eyes glistened at the flash of gold.

Miss Wymer contributed a small packet, saying, stiffly:

"Six and eightpence. I never give more; I never give less."

Every one, from high to low, gave his mite, William Fairfax being the last.

Doctor Bax gently nudged the young farmer, who sullenly flung some pieces of money into the bag. His ungracious manner drew the attention of the little doctor upon him, and from William's face his eyes wandered to Laura's. The trouble depicted there startled him, but he made no immediate reference to it.

"This is good," said Doctor Bax, drawing the strings of the bag together. "I am a rich man. I am a happy man. Thank you, friends, in the name of the poor."

A dog-cart was waiting outside for the doctor; he stood at the side of the pony until William came from the house.

"Here you are at last," he cried; "jump in."

But William turned away, saying he was not in the humor for company. Doctor Bax laid his hand gently upon the young man's arm.

"That is just the reason why company should be forced upon you; unless, indeed," said the doctor, with an upward glance at William's white face, "the impulse which urges you to shun your friends springs from pure happiness. There are feelings so sacred as to demand solitude—"

feelings with which, when our souls are stirred by them, only the spirit of nature can have communion. When I was a young man, I was at intervals for a brief space under such a spell. Then I would wander into the woods, where no human eye could behold me, and my soul would pour out its gratitude for the heavenly happiness which melted me into worship. William, when I was your age, I loved."

"And now?" questioned William, in a tone which exhibited no sympathy for his friend. His grief and despair were overwhelming in their selfish force, and he had no room in his heart for other sentiment.

"And now," replied Doctor Bax, with simple pathos, "I am alone in the world. Ah, no!" he cried, with swift correction of himself; "how can a man be alone when humanity calls out to him, holds out his hand, and says: 'Give me of your heart; double my joy by sharing it with me; lessen my sorrows and troubles by sympathizing with them!' No, I am not alone, though the woman I loved was snatched from me by death. Upon her grave I can lay not only sweet memories, but such daily duties as it is in my humble power to perform, and which it gladdens her soul to see, as she gazes upon me from the spirit-world with eyes of love."

"You are fortunate in your memories," said William, moodily.

"If I had not the evidence of my senses, I should think that it was Stephen Winkworth who makes that remark to me, not the William Fairfield who has as true cause to bless his lot as any man dare hope for. Yes, thank God, I am fortunate in my memories; they are the stars of my life, William, I have some visits to make, and you must accompany me. Nay, I will not be denied. You need companionship. I am a doctor of the mind as well as of the body, and I can see that you are suffering." He paused for a while, inviting confidence, and, eliciting none, continued: "Gloomy thoughts come to all men at times; and although I do not desire to intrude upon yours against your wish, I shall not allow you to brood over your shadows, and magnify them out of all reasonable proportions."

William started at the word "shadows," and considered for a moment. It was but a few minutes past ten o'clock, and the appointment which Stephen Winkworth had told him that Laura had made with another lover was not to take place until an hour after midnight. Doctor Bax was his true friend, and he could not shake him off without resorting to subterfuge. He had time to accompany the doctor, and return to witness the false girl's treachery, if Stephen Winkworth had not lied to him.

"I will go with you," he said.

Away they sped to the adjacent village, the pony throwing up the snow merrily with his hoofs, as though he knew upon what errand they were bent. Doctor Bax lived in the heart of the village, and he drew rein at his house. A pretty maid ran out to hold the pony, between whom and herself an intimacy of an affectionate nature evidently existed.

"Come in, William," said the doctor; "I want you to help me."

Upon the doctor's table was quite a number of parcels and a few toys, which he desired William to place in the dog-cart. While this was being done, the doctor employed himself in counting the money he had collected at Mr. Harrild's, adding to it the contents of a money-box which he took from a cupboard. As he wrapped the money in small paper packets, he explained the matter to William.

"I have a fancy sometimes for useless trifles which I can do very well without. When I succeed in checking my extravagant whims, I put the money thus saved in this particular money-box till Christmas comes. I have to encroach upon it occasionally, but I do so as seldom as possible. I have caught myself," he said, with a laugh, "fancying needless things out of sheer willfulness, for the purpose, I do believe, of adding to my store of savings. I have been fortunate this year—but not fortunate enough—not

fortunate enough. There are so many, and one man can do so little."

Despite himself, William was touched, knowing how frugally the doctor lived. Doctor Bax was not blind to this better mood of his companion, but he did not appear to openly observe it.

"Is this your yearly custom?" asked William.

"It is; and one of my best pleasures. We must be off now."

They had not far to go. The doctor drew rein again at a hovel, from the small window of which a single rush-light could be seen burning. He knocked at the door.

"Who's there?" cried a voice.

"Doctor Santa Claus," replied the doctor, in a loud, cheery tone, "with medicine."

The door was immediately opened by a poorly dressed woman, and the doctor entered with some parcels in his hand. William remained outside, and presently Doctor Bax beckoned him in, saying the pony would stand. The room was very scantily furnished. In one corner, on an old wooden bedstead, a man lay asleep, and by his side a child, also asleep. On the rail at the foot of the bed, so fixed that the child's eyes should fall upon it when she woke, was a wooden soldier, placed there by the doctor; and the parcels he had taken from the dog-cart were on a bare deal table. The woman, who had been ironing, and who had paused in her work to admit her visitors, was regarding the gifts with tears in her eyes.

"I wanted you to look at our child," said Doctor Bax to William. "Is she not a beauty?"

The mother turned down the coverlet with pride and affection, to allow William to see the pretty creature. Doctor Bax stooped and kissed the child, and William was impelled to do so likewise.

"Has your man complained much to-day?" asked Doctor Bax.

"Yes, all day long; he's asleep now from sheer weariness; it'd take a deal to wake him. His back has been paining him dreadfully, and all the feeling has quite gone out of his legs. He don't know when I am rubbing them, poor dear! Before he went to sleep, he was wishing for a Christmas dinner; it would be the last, he said, he should ever be able to eat. I didn't know what to say. Heaven only knew where a Christmas dinner was to come from, but I can give it to him now. God bless you, doctor."

"Come, William," said Doctor Bax, hastily, "we must be moving again. Good-night. Some time to-morrow I shall be here to see how your man is."

On the road the doctor said:

"Unless a man chooses to walk blindly through the world, he can see everywhere about him sacred and beautiful evidences of love. More among the poor than among the rich, for, from the very necessities of their condition, self-sacrifice—the holiest form in which love can show itself—is the more demanded. The poor woman whom we have just left has not been treated by her husband with tenderness or consideration. While he was in health, he squandered his money at the public house, and never saved a penny. Six months ago he met with an accident to his back, which will soon end his days. Since that time he has been unable to move from his bed, and the woman, without murmuring, has worked unceasingly for him and their child. She will be up half through the night, to finish the washing and ironing she obtains from the neighbors; and love will uphold her through all. When her man dies, after the first passion of grief at that lifting of a heavy load from her, she will devote herself to her child, whom she will work for with patience and cheerfulness, grateful for the burden love imposes on her."

Dr. Bax cast a furtive glance at William, but the young man's lips were fast set; and the downward lines on his forehead showed that though the doctor's words had reached him, their meaning was lost upon him.

This first visit was the key-note to all that followed. They went to places of the existence of which William had

hitherto been ignorant, and saw scenes of domestic life which would have left a deep impression upon him, had the eyes of his mind been open to anything but the contemplation of his own misery. But he was almost blind to them, so dazed was he with grief. It certainly was not the result of special design—for William was not his companion by premeditation; and he had his route carefully marked down—that, wherever Doctor Bax stopped, he elicited from the commonest and poorest of the poor and common people he visited sparks of human love which shone with a holy light among the ashes of misspent and wasted lives. Even from those who had fallen very—very low, and who, snatching the gifts he proffered, threw them aside out of his reach, and thanked him with assumed humility—even from crime, and shame, and sin, that laughed in his face, and mocked his tenderness—even from cunning ingratitude, which said, as it accepted his charity, “We have taken what you wished us to take; and now that you have shown yourself off, you may go”—even from the worst of these he did not depart without, with a better cunning than theirs, evoking from their gutter-natures some gleams of human goodness which made them, if only for a few moments, ashamed of their shame and degradation.

But if Doctor Bax intended to convey any lesson to his companion—and his frequent anxious glances at William’s moody face evidenced a wish to do so—by admitting him as a witness to these scenes, his design was a failure. Their course, though devious, lay within a narrow circuit, and wherever they went they heard the church-bells chiming the hour. Quarter after quarter was proclaimed, and William became more and more inattentive to the doctor’s errands, and more and more impatient for the coming of the moment which was to make or mar his happiness. The last visit was paid, the last parcel delivered, the last shilling taken from the doctor’s purse, and he and William stood by the side of the empty dog-cart.

“Jump up,” said Doctor Bax.

William raised his hand, and listened. A church clock was chiming; it wanted but a quarter of an hour to midnight. Mechanically William turned from the doctor, and commenced to walk in the direction of Warleycombe.

“Stop, William!” cried the doctor; “where are you going?”

“I have an act of duty to perform,” replied William, “and I must be alone.”

Doctor Bax hastened after the young man and arrested his steps.

“An act of duty!” he said: “at this time of night?”

“At this time of night, and no other.”

“It is troublesome walking through the snow. Let me set you on your way.”

“I have told you I must be alone.”

He did not speak roughly; his voice was cold, and there was a vacant ring in which it pained Doctor Bax to hear.

“Not a pleasant duty, William?”

“No. Ask me no further questions. Good-night.”

But Doctor Bax would not so lightly part with him.

“You distress me; I thought we were friends.”

William laughed harshly. The bitter emphasis placed on the word by Stephen Winkworth had robbed it of its good meaning.

“The duty before you!” persisted the doctor. “Is it a secret one?”

“It is.”

“The knowledge of which is not to be confided even to me.”

“Not to be confided even to you.”

“It is no light duty, William.”

“I wish to God I had died before it came in my way to perform! I will say no more, and I can not stop longer with you.”

“One other question,” said Doctor Bax, almost imploringly, “only one. Does Laura know of this?”

William, with no more force than was necessary, disengaged himself from the doctor, and waving his hand in adieu, plunged wildly through the snow. Doctor Bax gazed sadly after him until he was out of sight.

“I hoped to have had a good night’s rest,” he mused, as he mounted to his seat and slowly drove away; “and now not a wink shall I get—not a wink! Confound all mortality, I say. If men took a tenth part as much pains to make themselves happy as they take to make themselves miserable, this would be the blesseddest of worlds. As it is, I have no patience with it.”

This being uttered in a tone loud enough for the pony to hear, drew from that wise creature a determined protest; he stood stock still, and would not budge an inch in response to hard words and impatient urgings to get on. Not until Doctor Bax tried the soothing system, and spoke to him in his usual mild and affectionate manner, would he allow himself to be coaxed. And even after he had covered two or three hundred yards in his accustomed easy jog-trot, he pulled up again of his own impulse, to make sure, from his master’s gently spoken entreaty to put on the steam, that all was right behind.

William Fairfield walked so swiftly, that before midnight Warleycombe Lodge was in view. The night was cold, but he was in a hot fever. He looked toward the house in expectant dread. There was not a sign of life within or without. All was silent and still as death. The snow lay lightly upon roof and eave, upon tree and plain, and made the silence more impressive in its spiritual effect than the silence which is accompanied with darkness. A doubt stole upon him whether what had passed between himself and Stephen Winkworth was real or a dream; but it did not linger in his mind. “I am not mad yet,” he muttered, “and I must keep my senses about me to learn the truth.” Stephen could not have lied to him. He conjured up the picture which presented itself to him whichever way he turned—the picture of Laura and her lover! He saw their lips utter voiceless words of affection; he saw her, the woman he loved, lay her head upon this man’s shoulder; and he bit blood into his lips with jealous rage.

Suddenly the silence was invaded by the sound of the Christmas bells, which pealed joyously over field and hill, proclaiming the birth of peace and love. To the high-born and lowly alike they sung the holier theme, in the light of which earthly and sordid desires fade utterly away.

Dear bells! that bring glad light to weary eyes, that whisper courage to despairing souls, that instill hope into fainting hearts—ring on, dear bells, and teach your lesson anew. Humanity sits crowned in her throne of love, and a heavenly glory shines about her head. Ring on, dear bells, the time has come. Forth into the places where misery lurks; where crime and destitution lie in each other’s arms; where ignorance (compelled to live, and comprehending nothing but its own hard laws) breeds hapless generations; where it is not possible for virtue to take root and flower—forth into those places let the angels go. Spotless and pure they enter, with love and pity in their radiant eyes; and Heaven smiles upon them as they return with dirt-stained wings, the sacred evidence of sacred work performed. Ring on, dear bells, and teach once more your beautiful lesson. The pulse of the world is stirred with tender memories. The happy mother, aroused from sleep, whispers to her child lying awake by her side, “Dear child—dear child, the Christmas bells are ringing!” The girl-woman, musing on the day that shall make her a happy wife, sings to her heart to the rhythm of the bells, “Dear love—dear love, the Christmas bells are ringing!” The rich man smiles, the poor rejoices. Ring on, sweet Christmas bells! The air is filled with your music, which travels far across the snow-white land. Over forests of trees whose branches gleam with beauty, on to the furious seas, where the sailor, battling for dear life with the raging storm, thinks of what is dearer to him than life, and cries to his mate in the midst of the darkness, “At home, old boy, the Christmas bells are ringing!”

They rang in William Fairfield's ears, and bewildered him. He was deaf to their tender whisperings; they jarred upon his soul, and he strove, with a wild motion of his arms, to cast them aside, so that he might reflect undisturbed upon the treachery of the girl to whom he had given his heart.

This was his Christmas-eve! Next Christmas they were to have a merry party at their own house; it had been arranged that night. If he proved Stephen's tale to be true, where would his next Christmas be spent? He laughed in helpless derision. His future was blasted. What recked he now where or how his life was passed?

Some short distance from Warleycombe Lodge, but within sight of it, stood an old gnarled tree, prolific in queerly knotted excrescences and twisted limbs and branches. It was so old that there had rotted away, at its base, a space sufficiently large to allow a man to seat himself easily.

Here William mechanically rested; and with a weary body but active mind, set himself to his task of watching Reuben Harrild's house. Above him spread the fantastic branches of the tree, hung about with icicles, and fringed with delicate and graceful traceries in snow. Even in the midst of his rapt attention of the house he could not avoid being struck with their beauty, and at odd moments he turned his eyes upward to observe them. Presently a singular fancy crept upon him. The branches assumed weird shape and form. Crooked twigs became transformed into grotesque figures, perfect in limb and feature, and though there was not one among them that was not out of all reasonable proportion, not one seemed monstrous. They were all pygmies, and sat or stood in unnatural attitudes—with their legs twined under them; with their arms curled around their bodies, with their faces between their knees; here an elf, with his back to William, and his head turned over his shoulder to gaze at him; there a dwarf, lying at full length, and bending over toward him at a dangerous angle. The unfamiliar and curious figures were motionless for many moments; not a limb, not a feature stirred; but at the end of that time animation passed into their bodies. Motion came to their limbs, expression to their features. And of the hundreds of strange faces with which the tree was filled, there was not one that was not directed toward him, there was not one eye that was not fixed upon his. Some smiled with the familiarity of old acquaintanceship, others frowned with severe cause; and one old fellow, with a great knot in the middle of his forehead, eyed him so sternly that he turned away in anger at the delusion which he had allowed to take possession of his senses. As he turned, his attention was attracted to the beautiful appearance of the hedge-row which lined the boundary of Reuben Harrild's land. It was nearly man high; and as he gazed into the tangled skeins of bare and naked bush, snow-lined in purest white, he saw a thousand startling pictures in the maze. Through the interlaced vista he saw castles and rocks with the glow of sunlight upon them; merging gradually into the phantasy of many suns setting with a glorious light upon a dozen battle-fields, with shreds of armies flying from bloody pursuers; merging again into grave-yards lying in the light of pale, cold moons, which threw a ghastly glare upon a myriad white spectres in their winding-sheets, gauntly stretching out their attenuated limbs.

And there—wonder upon wonder!—was the same stern old man with the knot in his forehead, eying him more seriously than ever, and, with a monstrously disproportionate finger, beckoning him to approach. Whom did this old man resemble? His face was surely familiar to William. Ah, yes! it was Doctor Bax. No; Stephen Winkworth. Wrong again. It was one of the worst of the persons to whom the little doctor had been good that night, and who, crazy with drink, had threatened to do them both an injury if they did not instantly run. Wrong again. It was the toy-soldier which Doctor Bax had fastened to the foot of the child bed. Still wrong. It was Alice, the deformed girl, with her silken hair cut short. Wrong once

more. It was an entirely strange face—a face he had never before looked upon. William rubbed his eyes; there still stood the grim old man with his gigantic finger, bidding him to come.

But now the figure was no longer alone. On every side arose hundreds of white phantom shadows, inviting William, with the same beckoning gestures, to join their company. As he watched them, with increasing amazement, their numbers grew until the entire landscape became filled with motioning snow-shadows; and glancing upward into the spreading branches of the tree, a myriad white faces crowded down upon him, urging him to rise. Compelled to obey, he stood upon his feet, and looking toward the house, found that it had disappeared, that trees and hedges had vanished, and that he was standing on a great plain, carpeted with snow as far as the eye could reach, without a single speck or stain upon it to show that it had ever sustained a habitation. Not one stationary object reared itself between heaven and earth; and, stranger still, although the plain was thickly thronged with shadows gliding restlessly around him, and although he was continually turning this way and that, in his vain endeavor to follow their weird and ghostly motions, the surface of the snow did not present a single mark to denote that it was trodden.

And now a miracle occurred. A wild excitement possessed the phantom throng, and, the ranks dividing, a figure of surpassing loveliness approached. It was that of a beautiful woman, with a crown of crystals upon her head. A thousand stars of icicle gleamed about her. She was garbed in robes of snowy whiteness, which hung loosely upon her form. Her limbs and features were faultlessly molded, and in her eye dwelt an expression of such heavenly love and goodness, that William was impelled to kneel to her. But he was powerless; his limbs refused to obey his impulse. Closer and closer she approached. Clear as spotless crystal, she stood before him, lustrously beautiful, with a holy light in her eyes. No stain was on her soul—for he beheld it in all its purity. And on her heart, with a calm and placid smile upon its lips, lay the body of a sleeping child.

William, gazing with awe and wonder on the dazzling vision, felt a cold touch upon his arm, and turned, in the expectation of seeing some new wonder. But he stood alone, within a circle into which no spirit ventured to intrude, and a voice whispered into his ear the word:

"Faith!"

He knew that the presence of an Invisible Shadow was about him, and that this was the name of the spotless Woman who stood before him.

Again the vast throng of white phantoms upheaved, and the Woman disappeared; again they glided hither and thither, in seeming disorder; again their ranks divided, and in the spot whereon the Woman had stood arose another form which he shuddered to look upon. The form of a Creature with disheveled hair, with scowling features, with blood-shot eyes, with blanched and quivering lips, with trembling limbs. Its garments were soiled, and tightly on its brows was fixed a crown, with sharp and jagged points pressing inward on its forehead. It was transparent as the first, and lying on its heart was the bleeding form of a dying child, with a dagger in its breast.

For the second time the cold touch came upon his arm, and the voice whispered:

"Doubt!"

Again the shadowy throng upheaved, and hid the frightful Creature from his sight. Again their ranks divided, and disclosed a new and awful figure, crouching to the ground, with tears streaming from its eyes. Old before its time, haggard before its time, and utterly, utterly hopeless. It raised its wasted hands, it turned its face heavenward, in despairing appeal. And in its lap, with pallid, pitiful face, lay the form of a once beautiful child, cold and dead.

For the third time William felt the cold touch upon his

arm—the touch that now chilled him to the marrow; for the third time the voice whispered in his ear:

“Remorse!”

The moment the word was spoken, the throng of phantom shadows glided into their snow-tomb and vanished from his sight. The snow closed upon them like the resistless wave of a mighty sea, and the great plain lay naked in the eye of Heaven. But William was not alone. Once more the voice of the Invisible Shadow addressed him:

“Blind and infatuated! Upon this evening, when the universal heart of man should be turned to love and charity, have you allowed to be sown within your breast the seeds of doubt and mistrust? Upon this holy Christmas-eve have you allowed to be defiled the love which hallows life? She whom you love, and who loves you with perfect faithfulness, is stainless and truthful. This morning, Faith filled your heart. This night, Doubt occupies its place. Beware, lest to-morrow comes Remorse! Behold what you were, what you are, and what you shall be, if you allow passion and unreason to blind you!”

The voice ceased, and William, starting forward in terror, threw up his arms with a wild, despairing cry. For the white plain was forming itself into a vast valley, shelving into depths which appeared illimitable, and into which he was sinking. In vain he strove to save himself. Down he sunk, lower and lower still, until he was dizzily fearful that each moment would disclose a frightful precipice, over which he would be hurled and dashed to pieces. But although the soft, white snow enveloped him, and this terror encompassed his soul, he was sensible of the presence of shadowy spirits accompanying him in his flight; and ever and anon, in the course of his descent there gleamed athwart his otherwise blinded sight visions which enthralled him. Blue eyes and brown; faces wondrously beautiful; white hands that played about his hair; lips that smiled and mocked; persons for whom he entertained affection; his mother, who died when he was young, and the pretty child who was buried with her—one and all gleamed before his sight, like stars falling from heaven into the depths.

It seemed to him that he continued thus to sink for days and weeks and years, and that to this horrible fate he was eternally condemned; but at length the end came. Darkness fell upon him, and he knew nothing more until he found himself standing before a house surrounded by waving fields, the golden corn gleaming in the sun. The musical whisperings of the waving sheaves fell melodiously upon his ears, and he experienced an inexpressible sense of relief. For a brief space he gave himself up to the spell of a calm, delicious rest, and then he looked more narrowly upon the scene.

Strange! It was his own house before which he stood; these were his own fields that he saw around him. Not as he had seen them last: the evidence of more careful husbandry and cultivation was everywhere apparent. It was the realization of what he had dreamed his home and farm might be a few years after he married. And there, in the garden, was Laura, more matronly and more beautiful than in her maiden days. He stepped to her side and laid his hand on her shoulder, but she did not turn to look upon him. He spoke to her, but she betrayed no consciousness of his speech. He clasped her in his arms, but she melted from his grasp, and he saw her looking with a glad light in her lovely eyes toward the distant landscape. Wonder upon wonders! He saw a man approaching—himself with a little girl upon his shoulders—his child and hers, by the likeness in her pretty face to himself and Laura—crowing and clapping her tiny hands at her mother, who ran toward them with joyous cries, and was taken to her husband's embrace. And then he learned that he was a shadow, invisible, impalpable, and that his other self had taken his place in Laura's heart. He accompanied them, and walked by their side, listened to the fond terms of endearment that passed between them, a witness of their true and faithful affection. The day passed and he saw them in the evening, sitting by the window, her head resting upon his

shoulder. He heard her speak in sweetest accents of love; he comprehended the worship of her eyes as she gazed upon her husband, and he groaned in despair at the thought that he had faded out of his place in the world, and that another filled it.

“Shall I buy your thoughts?” asked her husband, in reference to a sweet and pensive expression he observed in her face.

“What will you give for them, William?”

He kissed her; she nestled closer to him.

“I am thinking of the past,” she said, “of something that is often in my mind, yet of which I have never spoken. Do you remember the last Christmas-eve we spent in my father's house before we were married?”

“Surely, my darling.”

“Something seemed to come between us that night, something that threw a shadow upon both our hearts. When you went away I was truly unhappy, and I did not sleep the whole of the night. How I sighed for the day to come, so that I might see you and tell you all. And when I saw you coming across the field, O William, I ran up to my bedroom and cried for very happiness. For I feared that I might never see you again, and the thought was like death to me.”

“Do not speak of that night,” he said, “the remembrance of my blind jealousy always brings pain to me.”

“It brings pleasure to me, William, for it seemed to me that I needed that proof of your trustfulness. I am, indeed, a happy woman, happy beyond the power of words.”

“I am blest in your love, my darling.”

“And I in yours, dear. I thank God for it hourly and daily.”

In this way, without one discordant element, the story of those two lives passed rapidly before the dreamer. He saw them in their youthful wedded days, contented and blessed. Years passed swiftly over their heads, and children grew around them, adding to their happiness. Every day was not a day of joy. Sorrow and sickness came to them as to others, and he beheld them weeping in the chamber of death over the lifeless form of one of their children, gathering consolation in their bereavement from their mutual affection, and from their firm belief that He whose all-seeing eye watches equally over all would, in his own good time, bring their darling again to their arms. And so, through the valley of the years, he followed the record of their honored lives until they were gathered to the fold of Him whose children live through all eternity.

Again he heard the voice of the spirit shadow:

“Such lives as these are the reward of Faith and Love. Doubter of what is most holy and beautiful, behold what shall spring from the seeds you have allowed this night to be set within your heart.”

Again he saw his home and farm, but, ah! how changed! Neglected lay the rich fields around his homestead; and in his garden, over-run with weeds, stood Laura, looking out upon the landscape. Could this be the Laura whom he loved? Although the familiar features were there, the expression of accustomed unhappiness struck him with fear. Presently his second self came toward her; but she was not, as before, taken to her husband's embrace, and he made no response to the yearning look with which ever and anon she raised her eyes to his. In silence they walked side by side to their house.

“Who has been here, Laura?”

“No person, William.”

“You are sure of that?”

“Indeed—indeed,” she replied, with a heavy sigh, “there has been no person here.”

He received her assurance with a sneer.

“We men are not a match for you fair women!”

She turned from him, sobbing, and William recognized what an unhappy home was here before him, darkened by doubt, gloomed by mistrust. Love did not illuminate it; faith did not sanctify it.

In the evening, the wife crept humbly, beseechingly, to her husband's side.

"William," she said, timidly, "is this to go on forever?"

"It is for you to decide," he replied, morosely.

"What can I do?" she cried, "oh, what can I do? Why do you still continue to doubt me?"

"Why do you give me cause?"

"Heaven knows I do not! You have an evil spirit in your heart, and I am weak and powerless against it. By the memory of our dead child, I have been true and faithful to you in deed and thought! Oh, William! our past life has been very, very miserable. Let it go, and all our misery with it. Do not darken the days to come; there is no cause; indeed—indeed, there is no cause! Cast from your heart the doubts that beset you, and do not entirely wreck our future. I love you still, despite your unkindness."

"Of course," he said, bitterly; "my unkindness—throw it all upon me! Like all you women! But I am not yet quite blind. Stephen Winkworth was right; you are all false alike."

"William—William!" she cried, tears of anguish in her eyes; "you have broken my heart!"

But he left her abruptly, without reply—left her to weep over the cold ashes of her love.

Thus passed the years. Thinner and paler grew the wife—more morose and haggard grew the husband; until the hour arrived when she lay upon her bed of death, her wan face looking up to his, while the angel of love and the demon of doubt still fought their battle within his soul.

"Kiss me, William," she said, slowly and painfully.

"I am sorry, yet glad, to leave you. Our life has not been what I hoped it would be. How happy we were before we were married—in the dear old days! How bright the future was! But all my dreams died years, long years ago. It is too late now to endeavor to bring them to life; but we shall meet again—in the Hereafter, when all doubt is cleared away. In that good time you will know me better, and will love me again, as in the old days, will you not?"

He choked back the spasms that arose to his throat, and, in a sudden agony of remorse, knelt by the bed and laid his hand in hers.

"Thank God!" she said, with glad light in her voice, as she held his hand to her wasted breast, and then raised it feebly to her lips. "It is all over; life was very hard to bear without your love. I gave you all my heart, William; but you took yours from me, and it was my life—my life! When I am gone, think of me sometimes with love in your thoughts. Look, William, look!" she arose in her bed and pointed out of window; "there is father's house. The snow is falling; is it Christmas, then? Beautiful shadows are moving! all around. Kiss me, William, for the last—last time. Ah, my love—my love!"

With that last kiss spiritual beauty passed into her face, and her soul winged its way to the bosom of our Heavenly Father.

"Such lives as these," said the Invisible Spirit, "are the fruits of Doubt. Behold Remorse!"

For the third time the aspect of his home changed. All now was drear and desolate. A deathly stillness reigned throughout the house, and, sitting by himself, with eyes that sought the ground, William beheld a prematurely old, grey-headed man. Unfriended, uncared for, he mourned in silence, surrounded by the sad evidences of a wrecked and wasted life. Brooding over what might have been, listening for what he shall never hear—for the tender voice of the woman whose heart he had broken, for the pretty prattle of children, and the joyous scrambling of their little feet; searching for the home-lights which he himself extinguished, and which shall never shine again; stretching forth his hands to the years that are gone, and gazing despairingly at the dead flowers which might have bloomed for him until he closed his eyes upon the world.

And for the first time, the spirit spoke:

"The story you have heard this night from the lips of a

hard, bad man is true. But if one sin, must all be guilty? Your life is now sanctified by the pure love of a pure woman. Cast it not lightly from you. Live, and be blessed with the angel, Love. Live, and be cursed with the devil, Doubt. The choice is before you. You have received your warning."

The voice ceased, and William, starting to his feet, rubbed his eyes in amazement, and looked about him. It was a dream—surely a dream, for no spirit-faces were in the twisted limbs and branches of the tree. The hedge-row beyond was very beautiful, but no beckoning shadows were there. The stars shone in the frosty heavens, and the moon threw a soft, tender light upon the snow-fields smiling in her face. The night was very lovely; all Nature was in repose. He looked toward Laura's house, and there—

For a moment his heart stood still, and then his body throbbed with maddening pulses. Stealing out from the house, he saw a female, her form throwing a long Shadow on the Snow. He could not mistake the step, the graceful turn of her neck, as she looked warily around. Another form meeting hers—the Shadow of a man upon the Snow! As the two met, William pressed forward in mad excitement. He saw the tenderest kisses passed between them; he saw them clinging to each other in fond endearment; he saw his Laura lying in another man's arms, and he sank to the ground with a bitter cry. A blight had fallen on his life.

PART II.

THE SHADOWS ON THE SNOW RANGES.

FAR away from English homes and English firesides, our story takes us, on a dark and cheerless night, to a small canvas tent, pitched in a gully, on each side of which frowning ranges rear their lofty heads. To this small tent we come from the dear old land, across wild and stormy seas, through gale and tempest, over tropical waters where the blood-red moon rises from a lurid ocean, past icebergs looming threateningly near; mid tracks of phosphorescent light gleaming in the darkness of the darkest night—to this small tent, wherein are centred all the elements of passion which make up the sum of human life in the great world beyond. Months fly, seasons change, and glowing aspirations fade away, and are lost forever, in the gulf of time. The drama of some men's lives is played out upon many stages; for others, a single scene upon a narrow stage suffices for the commencement and the end.

A dark, cold, cheerless night. The solitudes wear their saddest aspect. The moon is in its third quarter, and rises late. The wind, shrieking for freedom, tears about the snow-clad hills, and finding no outlet, robs the surfaces of a myriad soft and graceful flakes, and whirling them into furious eddies, is stripped in its turn of its stolen treasure by every sharp nook and crevice it strives to pass. The hills are here the master of the gale, which grows more frantic in its vain endeavors to escape into the plains, where it can revel at its pleasure, with naught to oppose its supremacy. But the mountains hold it fast, and laugh to scorn its wild shrieks, knowing full well that when its strength is spent, it will die away in fitful whispers, and find its grave in the valleys below.

A dark, cold, cheerless night. With the exception of this small tent, no trace of civilization near. Here Nature reigns supreme. The lofty mountains, rising range over range, shut out from the world the gully in which our scene is laid. And yet, between this sterile, savage spot and our lovely Devon lane there is a close and human connection. Invisible but indestructible links of love connect the Old World and this that we call the New. The thoughts of one man at least, sitting in the tent with his face hidden in his hands, are traveling toward the beautiful lane in Devon, which teems with pleasant and one terribly bitter memory—to the narrow, quiet lane in the garden of England, wherein were culminated his life's hap-

pininess and his life's great sorrow. Again the scene rises before him. Again the old familiar faces shape themselves in the air, and visit him with loving looks and smiles. Again a tearfully happy face is resting on his breast, and loving eyes seek his. Again the fond arms are thrown around him, and a tender form is folded to his breast. And then he wakes, and looking up with a bitter smile, shakes off the dream in anger.

Within the tent a party of men are seated before a miserably scant fire. The canvas—the only roof between them and heaven—scarcely screens them from the inclemency of the storm; and strong and hardy as they are, they huddle close together for warmth, and greedily watch the dying embers before them. The men are rough-looking fellows, with great beards and strong limbs, and a decided assertion of physical strength in every movement of their bodies. Each has a short black pipe in his mouth, which he puffs vigorously and with a will; and all are alike attired in rough pea-jackets, moleskin trousers, and water-tight knee-boots; their billycock hats are on the ground or on the wooden stretchers upon which they rest at night. Although they are in as desperate a condition as men well can be; although the country, for miles around, is knee-deep, and in some places man-deep, with snow; although a heavy drift without is raising barriers almost impassible; although their last handful of wood is burning on the fire, and they know they can obtain no more; although they have not three days' provisions in their tent—no craven fear disturbs them. If they have to die, they will die like men, as others have done before them. Some three or four weeks ago they had set off on the track of a party of miners, who, it was whispered, had discovered a new gold-field. Stealing out in the dead of night, lest they themselves should be followed, they had plunged into a portion of the country which they did not hope to find other than barren, inhospitable, and incapable of sustaining human life. With the indomitable courage and apparent recklessness which form part of the gold-digger's character, they set themselves the task of tracking the men before them, and discovering the locality of their workings. No pluck in the world can beat the pluck of the gold-digger. He snaps his fingers at obstacles from which other men would shrink affrighted; he fights with the barrenness of nature, and conquering, opens up country which, but for his hardihood and daring, would remain, with its treasure, forever shut out from the knowledge of mankind. There is no pioneer so brave, so persistent, so enduring. In no age or country have the nobler physical qualities of man been more worthily exercised. In the Australian colonies the gold-digger is the pioneer of progress.

These men, bound together for the time by an almost brotherly tie, differed widely in character and appearance. Each might have moved, and probably did, in a different grade of life in the Old Country; but so small a matter as one being born a gentleman and another a common laborer was here of no account, for a gold-digger's career levels all such distinction. Their great beards made their faces so many distinct puzzles, physiognomically; but there was that about their appearance, action, and conversation which in some measure served as an index to their several characters. One was known as Gentleman George. The nickname conveyed no satire, and none was intended when it was bestowed. Gentleman George was a gentleman of good breeding, a handsome fellow enough, with laughing blue eyes and the strength of a Hercules. Opposite to him, squatting upon his blanket, was Cornish Tom. He had been a gold-digger for twenty years, and had mined in California, New South Wales, Victoria, and New Zealand. He might have made a fortune a dozen times over, for he had had fully that number of chances. But the careless fellow had never taken the golden tide at its flood.

There was no rest for the sole of Cornish Tom's foot. No sooner did he hear of a "new rush" than he caught the fever and was off to it. Many were the rich claims he had abandoned, to be among the first on a new gold-field.

Hundreds and thousands of miles of bush and plain had he covered on foot, in the blithest of spirits, to discover, more often than not, that he had been following a will-o'-the-wisp. Yet he was always hopeful, always sanguine. Free-handed, simple-minded, hard-working, and restless, he was the type of a class which will be easily recognized by those who are acquainted with life on the gold-fields. The third of the party was a young man remarkable chiefly for his reticence and furious love of hard work. He hoarded his gold like a miser. The very opposite of Cornish Tom, who flung his money about with utter recklessness, Dick Driver spent never a shilling in waste, and was so consistently steady and saving that he frequently brought upon himself the contempt of his comrades. The fourth of the party was William Fairfield.

Yes; maddened by what he had witnessed on that fatal Christmas night, William Fairfield, with as little delay as possible, had signed away his farm to Stephen Winkworth. He wrote but a few words to Laura. They were these:

"I was outside your house last night, and saw all. I leave you with a grief at my heart which time can never remove. May your future be happier than that I see before me. Farewell!"

And, without waiting for explanation or reply, he traveled hastily to Plymouth, and took passage in a ship about to sail for New Zealand. Commonplace reading this; but life, for the most part, is made up of commonplaces, and ordinary events require but ordinary language to express them.

As he sat by the miserable fire on this cold and bitter night, his thoughts naturally—for death stared him in the face—again and again traveled back to his last Christmas-eve at Warleycombe. Indeed, he was forever dwelling on the fatal time. He would lie awake, night after night, wandering through the maze of the past. Even in the midst of his work, the memory of some small incident which had given him pleasure would arise in reproach against him. At times he would wonder what *she* was doing at the moment of his thought; and he would set his wounds bleeding by recalling her face, so innocently beautiful; so sweet to gaze upon, so fair, so false. He encouraged these memories, though he extracted from them nothing but the most exquisite misery.

One maddening doubt continually haunted him. Had he been rash in judging Laura? No, he would indignantly reply; how was it possible he could have been mistaken? Had he not the evidence of his senses? Had not his own eyes been witness of her faithlessness? But still he wandered back to the theme, and still the doubts remained.

"Whew!" whistled Gentleman George, at the subsidence of a great blast of wind, which shook the tent perilously: "I hope we shall not be blown away! We're in a pretty pickle as it is, but that would make it ten times worse. Just take a peep out-of-doors, Willy, and see what it looks like."

Willy—the only name by which William Fairfield was known—went to the door and cautiously opened it, and holding it fast, for fear that it might be blown out of his hand, let in a gust of wind that raised the dying embers of the fire into a deceitful blaze, and caused his mates to shout to him to close the door.

Stepping out quickly, and closing the door after him, William, with his keen sight, strove to pierce the darkness. In truth, it was a bitter night. A heavy wind was driving the snow before it fiercely. The clouds hung black and thick in the heavens. The tremendous ranges which hemmed in the little band of men were snow-clad from base to summit, and the flying drift, blowing into William's face, almost blinded him.

Suddenly William made a step forward in the darkness. Wiping his eyes clear of the snow, and shading them with his hand, he peered before him intently, in search of some familiar object. What he sought did not meet his gaze, and hastily stepping into the tent, he fastened the door and resumed his seat.

"Well?" asked Gentleman George, for the disturbed expression on William's features invited inquiry.

"Did you see the fork this afternoon?" William abruptly asked.

His mates turned their eyes upon him.

"Yes," was the reply.

The fork was a tree with a quaintly-formed limb branching out of it, which stood about a hundred yards from the tent.

"Are you sure you are not mistaken?"

"Certain."

"Well, it has either been blown away, or the snow has covered it. If it has not been blown away, there must be twelve feet of snow where it stands."

The fork of the tree stood about that height from the ground.

A low whistle broke from the lips of the three men, and Cornish Tom, knocking the ashes out of his cutty-pipe, refilled it with more than usual care and deliberation.

They followed his movements, knowing he had something important to say. Pressing the tobacco into the bowl of his pipe with his left thumb, he said:

"I reckon we're in for a tight job. We've about three day's grub in the tent, and there's no getting any more within twenty miles of this. The snow-storm's going to last, and I'm blessed if I see how we're going to fight it out in this gully. We'll have to make our way out of it."

"And leave behind us a claim that's a turning out an ounce of gold to the tub!"

"That's so."

"With the chance of never being able to find the place again!"

"Right you are."

No one ventured to dispute long with Cornish Tom; he was known not to be fond of giving idle opinions.

"Well," said Gentleman George, "I reckon there's no help for it. I was once told by a shepherd that places like these are snowed in at this season of the year sometimes for months together."

"The only thing we can do," said Cornish Tom, "is to try and hump it back to-morrow. It'll be no easy job, and it'll take time. Did any of you see smoke rising from the next gully this morning?"

"No," they all replied.

"The men there have made tracks, then, knowing it would be death to stop. We'll have to follow their example, mates. An eternal shame it is that when we've found a rich gully like this, we should have to run away from it! Why, we could make a pile in six months! I wonder what sort of ground they've been working in in the next gully."

"I wonder if they're well off for provisions," speculated Gentleman George.

"It's all very well," said Dick Driver, speaking very slowly, "to say that we shall have to follow them; but it strikes me we shan't be able to get out of this as easily as we think. Look here," and he kicked the side of the tent, against which a mass of accumulated snow was heavily pressing; "there's a big drift-setting in; the old tracks are rubbed out, and if the fork is buried, we might as well try to walk through the sea as attempt to get out that way. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if we were never to get out at all. Hark! what was that?"

They inclined their heads and listened. The only sound they heard was the rushing of the wind past the tent.

"Did you hear anything?" they asked of Dick Driver.

"I suppose it was fancy," he replied. "At such a time as this a man ain't accountable for every thing that passes through his mind. I was never given much to religion; if I had been, I should say my prayers twice over to-night."

The only answer Gentleman George and Cornish Tom gave to this was a steadier puffing at their pipes. They were well aware of their danger, but they did not care to talk overmuch about it. Indeed, every man of the party

but one had, before this time, grasped the full extent of the peril—every man but William Fairfield. He had not clearly realized it until this night, and now it came upon him with terrible force. Never to get back! To be buried here, and lost to the world forever! Never to see dear Devon again! Never again to see or hear of Laura! An intense and burning desire seized him to see and speak with her; for he loved her still—loved her dearly. It was maddening to think he should never look upon her face again.

"Would it have been better for me," he thought, distracted by remorseful doubts, "not to have seen? It would, for I should not have known; I should have been blessed and happy; and now——"

He went again to the door, and, heedless of the almost blinding snow, stepped out. He strained his gaze across the hills, as if he hoped by so doing he could conjure up Warleycombe in the distance. And if he could have done so—if at that moment a vision of what was passing there had dawned upon him, what would he have seen and heard?

He would have seen Laura sitting listlessly at her favorite window, overlooking the garden, now radiant with nature's loveliest gifts. He would have observed how thin and pale she had grown in the few months that had passed since Christmas. He would have seen her gazing with wistful look far—far beyond, as though she too were striving to annihilate space, and look again upon the form of the man she loved; for she had not turned her heart from him, and had he presented himself to her, she would have taken him to her breast, and wept over and forgiven him.

He would have seen her father enter softly, and stand by her side, with his hand on her shoulder. He would have heard Reuben Harrild say:

"The old wound, child?"

"The old wound, father," she answers, sadly; "it will never—never he healed."

"Child—child!" Reuben Harrild cries, "he is not worthy of you."

She lays her fingers on his lips.

"He is mistaken, father, and has misjudged me. He will know it soon, perhaps does now, and thinks better of me. Oh, that he were here that I might tell him I forgive him!"

And later on, when Laura was alone, William would have seen her on her knees, her prayer being that her lover should return to her, or that she should die.

Had he possessed the disputed gift of clairvoyance, he might have turned to another home—that of Stephen Winkworth. There he would have seen poor crippled Alice lying sick on her bed, and Stephen standing by in anguish: Doctor Bax, also, being present, looking somewhat graver than of old.

"May children never make faces at medicine again," says the little doctor, in a cheerful voice, "if you are not something better to-day, Alice. We shall have you presently running about the house as lively as a cricket."

A weary smile passes over her face.

"I shall never get well, I am afraid, doctor."

"Nonsense, child, nonsense!" exclaimed Doctor Bax; "what do you mean by flying at me in that way? What do you mean by presuming to know better than I do? Do you want to upset the pharmacopœia?"

"There is only one thing that *can* make me better, doctor," says Alice.

Stephen Winkworth bends eagerly forward.

"What is that one thing?" cries the doctor, vivaciously.

"Give it a name, my dear, and it shall be yours in a twinkling."

She shakes her head in sadness.

"You cannot get it for me," she says. "If William Fairfield would come back and comfort Laura, it would gladden and do me good." She presses her hand to her heart as she speaks, and looks toward Stephen, who turns

from his child with a groan. "Laura is very unhappy, doctor."

"Very unhappy, child," replies Doctor Bax, in a tone of infinite compassion; for words have passed between him and Stephen Winkworth which make him more than suspect the deformed girl's secret of her hopeless love.

"You really do not know, doctor," she asks, "what made William Fairfield go away so suddenly?"

"How on earth *should* I know?" cries Doctor Bax, irascibly. "Some confounded mischief-maker had a hand in it, I dare say. And yet that he should have so conducted himself! It is unaccountable, most unaccountable. I was in his company last Christmas-eve until nearly midnight, and if I had had the most remote suspicion of what was passing in his mind, I would never have left him—never! I have lived in this miserable world a good many years, my dear, and the longer I live the more it puzzles me. How such a young man—generous and noble-minded, as I believed him to be, could so basely desert that sweet girl—for she's an angel, my dear, and so are you!—is the most incomprehensible piece of folly it has ever been my bad fortune to be mixed up in. Upon my word, I believe the world and everybody in it have gone crazy. Good-by, my dear; I will see you to-morrow."

And Doctor Bax leaves the house, rubbing his head with an air of great vexation.

* * * * *

William Fairfield saw nothing but the desolate ranges; heard nothing but the shrieking of the storm; and a terrible and hopeless despair gathered about his heart. He could scarcely keep his senses at the thought of dying uncared for in this wild spot. But he could not bear the cold, and he was fain to rejoin his mates in the tent.

"I have never been much of a believer in presentiments," Gentleman George was saying, "but I have got the idea in my head that if we don't get out of this to-morrow, we shall never get out of it alive. We could keep the snow away for a pretty long time, but without wood for a fire, I'd defy the very devil to keep himself from freezing. Then, we have nothing to eat."

"And the bacca's nearly run out," grumbled Cornish Tom. "I'd give a pound of gold for a pound of Barrett's twist. I wouldn't care a brass farthing, if we had plenty of bacca."

"Will the old folks at home," said Gentleman George, "ever have an idea of our fate?"

"Don't keep on talking like that, George," remonstrated Cornish Tom; "you'll make me feel as low-spirited as a bandicoot."

The simile was accepted in its most expressive sense by his mates, though it would have puzzled any of them to impart accurate information as to whether the animal were predisposed to low spirits. But for forcible figures of speech on the gold-fields the bandicoot was an invaluable creature.

"It isn't my fault, Tom; it comes. I haven't seen my parents for over ten years; and though I don't write to them, and I don't know, indeed, if they are alive, I can't help thinking of them at such a time as this. I never heard you speak of yours, Tom."

"Haven't got none," said Cornish Tom, laconically.

"Have you, Willie?" asked Gentleman George.

William shook his head.

"You have, I know, Dick," George pursued, "for I've seen you reading their letters—and have envied you, mate. You see, I was a scape-grace at home, and they were glad to get rid of me, and I was not sorry to go. But I should like to see their dear old faces again, if they are alive."

"And so you will, George," said Cornish Tom, energetically; "but you are not going the right way about it. We must keep stout hearts, and we shall be all right. At all events, we won't stay here till we're so snugly snowed in that we can't escape. We'll start to-morrow morning, and cut our way out of this."

"Hark!" cried William, starting to his feet. "Do you not hear that cry?"

They all listened attentively; no sound reached their ears but the moaning of the wind.

"It's hard for a man to hear anything in such a gale as this," said Cornish Tom. "Great Lord, what is that?"

They rushed to the door. A deadening roar drowned the shrieking and moaning of the wind, and, looking out, they beheld a sight which made them hold on to one another in awe and wonder—an avalanche, slipping from the summit of one of the loftiest ranges! Down—down it thundered, throwing out huge snow-sprays, each one sufficient to bury a hundred men. Down the steep side of the mountain it rushed, increasing in volume with every foot it rolled, and detaching great masses of snow and ice, which leaped over each other with awful velocity, until they thundered into the gully. A roar of ten thousand evil spirits; an angry rush as of a giant army of white monsters, filling the air with terrible sights and sounds; and then the avalanche spread itself with a terrific thud at the base of the mountain.

The lookers-on, with white faces, held their breaths, all thought of their own peril gone in the awful grandeur of the scene.

"We shall be blown into ice-blocks," presently said Gentleman George, as a deep sigh of relief escaped him, "if we stand here much longer. Thank God, we are not under it!"

With a feeling of devout thankfulness in their hearts, they went into the tent, and, scraping up the scattered embers of the fire, huddled around it in close companionship.

To divert his thoughts from the contemplation of the dread peril which surrounded them, Gentleman George began to talk of his gold-field adventures, in which all joined with eager interest, having the same object in view as himself. Each man had something worth listening to to narrate, but the most famous authority among them was Cornish Tom, and he spoke of his experiences on new gold-fields with an eloquence and power of language strange from the bearded lips of so rough a man.

"You have been to every new rush in the colonies, I do believe," said Gentleman George.

"Pretty well to all of them, mate. It has been a kind of mania with me. Mayhap I shall never go to another."

"You were one of the first on Madman's Gully, I've been told, Tom."

Cornish Tom's face suddenly grew pensive, and he gazed into the dying embers in the huge fire-place, murmuring, "Little Liz—little Liz!" in a voice so soft and sweet, that their hearts were drawn more closely to this mate of theirs, whose life was known to contain many affecting episodes.

"Little Liz!" echoed Gentleman George, in a sympathetic tone. "Anything to do with Madman's Gully, Tom?"

"Yes, mate."

"After the awful sight we have just seen, Tom," said Gentleman George, "none of us, I am sure, are in the humor for sleep. Tell us the story of Little Liz."

Cornish Tom was silent for a while.

"It will do neither me nor you any harm, mates," he said, still gazing at the dying embers, "to recall the memory of that dear angel at this time. Keep silence, mates; I will tell you the story."

They did not speak after this, and presently Cornish Tom, into whose manner a touching tenderness had stolen, commenced the story of

LITTLE LIZ.

When the Victorian gold-fever was at its height, people were mad with excitement—neither more nor less. I was as mad as the others, although I came to the colony from California, which was suffering from the same kind of fever, and which was pretty mad, too, in its way. But Victoria beat it hollow; for one reason, perhaps, because there was

more of it. The strange sights I saw and the strange stories I could tell, if I knew how to do it, would fill a dozen books.

In my time I have lived all sorts of lives and have worked with all sorts of mates, picked up in a rough-and-tumble kind of way, which was about the only way then that mates picked up each other. One day you did not know the man that the next day you were hob-a-nob with. I had some strange mates, as you may guess, but the strangest I ever worked with, and the one I liked more than all the others put together, was Bill Crickett. Bill was as thin as a lath and as tall as a May-pole, and had come to the colony under a cloud. I don't mean by that that he had done anything wrong at home, and was sent out at the expense of the Government, like a heap of others I mated with; but he was obliged to run away from England for a reason I didn't know when I picked him up, but which I learned afterward.

He had brought his wife out with him—a poor, weak, delicate creature, who died soon after he landed, leaving behind her a baby, a little girl, the only child they had. This child Bill left with some people in Melbourne, and came on to the gold-diggings to try his luck. I was working at that time in Dead Dog Gully, near Forest Creek, which was just then discovered, and Bill and me came together as mates. A better one, to do his share of the work and a little bit over, I should be unreasonable to wish for. I never had anything to complain of. On the contrary. He never shirked his work, seeming to like it more than anything else in the world. And once, when I was laid up with colonial fever—some of you have had a touch of it, I dare say, and know how it pulls a man down—he nursed me with the tenderness of a woman, and worked the claim without a murmur. Those are things one doesn't easily forget. Soon after I got well our claim was worked out, and we had to look elsewhere for another; for every inch of Dead Dog was taken up. I remember well the night we parted. We were sitting in our tent, Bill and me, with our gold before us and our revolvers at full cock on the table. We had to look out pretty sharp in those days, mates. Many's the man who has been robbed and disposed of, without any one being the wiser; many's the man that has been murdered, and thrown down deserted shafts. Queer things were done on the diggings during the first fit of the fever, that human tongue will never speak of. Murder will out, they say; that isn't quite true. I've seen some sights that made me shiver to think of, the secrets of which will be only known on the Day of Judgment.

Well, we were sitting there, with our gold before us. Our claim had been a rich one, and we had three hundred ounces to divide, after all our sprees—and we had a few, I can tell you!

"Tom," said Bill, as he sat looking at the gold, "if I had had as much money as that when I was in the Old Country, I should never have come out to the gold-fields, and my dear wife would not have died."

"That's more than you can say for a certainty," I answered.

"Not a bit of it," he said; "my wife would have been alive, and we should have been living happily together. I'll tell you how it was. I was a contractor in a small way at home, and had lots of uphill work, for I commenced with nothing. While I was courting Lizzie, an old hunk of a money-lender wanted to marry my girl. She had a nice time of it, poor lass! with her father, on one side, trying to persuade her to marry the old hunk, and me, on the other, begging her to be faithful to me. But I had no need to do that. There was only one way out of the difficulty; we ran away, and got married without their knowing."

"We were as happy as the days were long, and should have remained so, but for the old money-lending thief. To spite me for taking the girl from him, he bought up all my debts—about three hundred pounds' worth—and almost drove me mad. And one morning I caught the villain in

the act of insulting my Liz. I didn't show him any mercy; I beat him till he was sore, and then I kicked him out of the house. The next day the bailiffs were on the lookout to arrest me for debt, and I had to run for my liberty. He sold me up, root and branch, and turned my wife into the streets, and we came together to Liverpool, where Lizzie was confined. I tried hard to get work, but couldn't; starvation or the workhouse was before us. All my chances at home were gone, and there was nothing for it but emigration. I shipped before the mast, and a friend assisted me to pay Lizzie's passage in the steerage. A fortnight after we were out at sea, she told me that the doctor who attended her in her confinement had said that a long sea voyage would probably be the death of her. His words came true; she died within the year. So, you see, if I had had my share of that gold at home, I could have paid that d—d old scoundrel, and my wife would not have died. I want to get a heap of gold, and go home and ruin him. I should die contented then."

He arose, and walked up and down the tent, cursing the man who he believed had killed his wife.

"I tell you what, Tom," he said, after a bit, "I shall tramp to Melbourne to see my little daughter, and then I shall go prospecting. There are places, I'll stake my life, where the gold can be got in lumps, and I mean to find them out. I dreamed the other night that I came upon it in the rock, and that I had to cut it out with a chisel."

I didn't like the idea of losing my mate, and I did my best to persuade him not to go; but I might as well have talked to a lamp-post. So we divided the gold, shook hands, and the next morning he started on the tramp to Melbourne.

I didn't see or hear anything of him for a good many months after this; and somehow or other, when I lost him I lost my luck. Every shaft I bottomed turned out a duffer. I could hardly earn tucker. I worked in Jackass Gully, Donkey-woman's Gully, Pegleg, Starvation Point, Choke'm Gully, Dead-horse Gully, and at last made my way to Murdering Flat—nice, sociable names!—pretty well down on my luck. I had been in Murdering Flat three weeks, and was sitting alone in my tent one night, reckoning up things. In those three weeks I hadn't made half an ounce of gold, and there wasn't two pennyweights in my match-box—so that I didn't feel over-amiable. That day I had been particularly unlucky, having made about three grains of gold, which I flung away in a rage. I was just thinking whether I mightn't just as well go to the grog-shanty and have a drink—it was past nine o'clock at night—when who should walk straight into my tent but my old mate, Bill. I scarcely knew him at first, for he had let his hair grow all over his face, and he was almost covered with it, up to his eyes and down to his breast.

"Bill!" I cried, jumping up.

"Yes, it's me, Tom," he said. "Are you alone?"

"Yes, Bill."

"Stop here, then, till I come back, and don't let anybody in but me."

He went out, and returned in about ten minutes with a beautiful little girl in his arms.

"Hush!" he said, stepping softly. "Speak low. She's asleep."

She wasn't above six years old; but she was so pretty, and looked so like a little angel—such as I never expected to see under my roof—that I fell in love with her at once. Of course, I was a bit surprised when he brought her in, and he couldn't help observing it as he laid her carefully upon my stretcher.

"This is my little girl, Tom," he said, answering my look. "If I ever go to heaven, I shall have her to thank for it. She is my good angel."

"Where are you come from?" I asked, after we had covered the pretty fairy with a blanket.

He looked cautiously round, as though he feared some one was in hiding, and then, sitting opposite me at the

table, rested his chin on his hands, and said, in a whisper: "I've found it, Tom!"

There was such an awful glare in his eyes, that I felt quite scared as I asked him what it was he had found.

"I've found the place where the gold comes from," he said, in the same sort of hoarse whisper, "I am on it, Tom! I knew I should find it at last. Look here!"

First going to the door, to see that no one could get in without warning, he pulled from his breast-pocket a nugget of pure gold that must have weighed near upon seventy ounces, and five or six others, from fifteen to twenty ounces each. Lord! how my heart beat as I handled them, and how I wished I could drop across some of the same kidney! I don't know how it is with you, mates; but, although I don't believe I value the gold much when I've got it, there's no pleasure in life so great to me as coming suddenly upon a rich patch. I think the sight of bright-shining gold at the bottom of a dark shaft is one of the prettiest in the world.

"Is that good enough for you?" he asked, as he put the nuggets back into his pocket.

I laughed.

"Any more where they came from, Bill?"

"More than you could carry." I stared at him, believing he had gone mad. "It's true. How are you doing?"

"I can't make tucker, Bill. My luck's dead out."

"It's dead in now," said he; "I've come to put fifty ounces a day in your pocket. What do you say? Will you go mates with me, again?"

That was a nice question, wasn't it, to put to a hard-up digger, without an ounce of gold in his match-box?

"Will I, old fellow?" I cried. "Will I not! When shall we start?"

"Stop a minute, Tom," he said, gravely. "I've something to say to you, first. I want you for a mate again, and shall be glad to have you; but we've got to strike a bargain. You see my little girl there?"

I nodded.

"She is the blood of my heart. I am like a plant, Tom, which would wither if deprived of God Almighty's blessed dew. She is my dew. If anything was to happen to her I should wither, and rot, and die. I want you for my mate, because I believe you to be honest and true. And I am going to show you a place where the gold grows—a place which, of my own free will, I would not show to another man in the world. I have hunted it and tracked it, never dreaming of the danger I have run. But do you know, Tom, that since I have had my little pet with me"—and he laid his hand, oh, so gently! upon her cheek—"all my recklessness and courage seem to have gone clean out of me. For it is *her* life I am living now, not my own. And I think, what will become of her if I die before my time—if I should slip down a shaft, or it should tumble in on me, or I should fall ill of a fever, or anything should happen to me that would deprive her of a protector? These thoughts haunt me night and day, and presentiments come over me sometimes that fill me with fears I can't express. Now, Tom, listen to me. The place I am going to take you to will make you rich. If we can keep it to ourselves for a few months (though there is another in the secret, but he won't peach, for his own sake), we shall get at least five thousand ounces—perhaps double as much; there's no telling whether we shan't drop across a mountain of gold. Now, lay your hand upon your heart, and swear by all you hold dearest that if anything should happen to me, you will take care of my little darling, and be a second father to her when I am gone!"

I bent over the dear little one's face—I can feel her sweet breath again upon my cheek—and kissed her. She stirred in her sleep, and smiled. Then I said:

"That kiss is a sacrament, Bill. By all that's holy, I will be a second father to your little girl, should she need one. So help me God!"

He took my hand, and the big tears rolled down his

beard. It was full five minutes before he was calm enough to speak.

"Now I'll tell you all about it. You remember my leaving you to go to Melbourne, after we had worked out our claim in Dead-dog Gully. Well, when I got there, I found that my little girl was not being well treated. The people she was living with had taken to drink, and had neglected her. And my heart so grew to her—I can see my Lizzie's face in hers—that I made up my mind never to leave her again. So, when I was ready to start, I brought her away with me, and we've traveled together, since that time, I don't know how many hundreds of miles."

"How in the world did you manage it?" I asked, in wonder. "The little thing couldn't walk."

"And if she could," he answered, "do you think I would have let her blister her pretty feet? My darling! Manage it, Tom? Sometimes I carried her, and I got her odd lifts, now and then, upon the drays and wagons going our way. There was never a drayman or a wagoner that refused to give my little girl a ride, and that wasn't sorry to part with her—good luck to them! Why, some of them came miles out of their way for her sake, and would never take anything for it but a kiss from her pretty lips. And do you know, Tom," he said, "she saved me from the bush-rangers once. We were in the Black Forest, and they were on me before I knew where I was. We had just finished tea, and I was stooping over the log-fire to get a light for my pipe, so that my little girl was hidden from them at first. I turned, with my heart in my mouth—not for myself, Tom; for her—and looked at them. There were four of them, splendidly mounted, dressed in red serge shirts and bright silk sashes. 'Stand!' they cried, leveling their revolvers at me; 'stand, for your life!' Well, my girl jumps up, and runs to my side and takes hold of my hand. They were dumbfounded. 'Well, I'm d——d!' said one, under his breath; and then, in a louder tone: 'Is that yours, mate?' 'Yes,' I answered, looking into their faces for pity. Upon that, they put up their pistols, and one of the men got off his horse and came close to us. 'Don't be frightened, little one,' he said. 'I'm not frightened,' I whispered my pet, playing with the fringe of his red silk sash. 'I'm not going to harm her, mate,' he said to me; and he knelt before my darling, and put her pretty hands on his eyes, and kissed them again and again. 'If every man had an angel like this by his side,' he said, softly, 'it would be the better for him.' Then he took off his sash and tied it around my girl's waist; and I had to lift her up to the other men to kiss them. That being done, they wished me good-night, and rode off. That was a lucky escape, wasn't it? However, after a time I found I couldn't get along as quickly as I wanted, and, besides, when I was on the track of the gold I've discovered, I had to travel through country where I didn't meet with drays or wagons. So I bought a wheelbarrow."

"A wheelbarrow?" I cried, more and more surprised.

"Yes, Tom," he said, with a comical look, "a wheelbarrow; and I put my little darling in it, and wheel her wherever I want to go. Well, to get along with my story, I came one day to the place where I'm working now, and where I want you to join me. Directly I saw it, I knew the gold was there, and I put up my tent. Before the week was out, I had a hundred ounces. I went to a cattle-station about twelve miles off, and bought a stock of provisions. Then I set to work in earnest. The whole place is a great gold-bed; wherever you dig it peeps up at you with its bright eyes. There's plenty of quartz on the hills, and you can't search five minutes without finding it. At the top there's more quartz than gold; deep down, I'll lay my life, there's more gold than quartz. I worked by myself in this gully for four weeks, making about a hundred ounces a week, when one day, as I was panning out the gold in the creek hard by, I saw a man looking at me. He had wandered by accident to the place, and had discovered me working. My mind was made up in a minute. I took

him for my mate, so that my secret might be kept, and we worked together till the day before yesterday."

"What has become of him?" I asked.

"Oh, he's there still, getting gold, but not as much as he might if he was one of the right sort. For I know a gully that's worth a dozen of the one we've been working in, and I don't intend that he shall put a pick in it. No, Tom, that's for you and me. I haven't parted from him without good reason. My little darling never liked him from the first, and would never let him kiss her. Then there's Rhadamanthus——"

"Rhadamanthus?"

"Don't be scared, Tom. It's only a dog, that was given to me by a drunken scholar—or, rather, given to Lizzie in the bush—on the condition that we were always to call him Rhadamanthus—which we do, though at first it was a jaw-breaker. Then, as I say, there's Rhadamanthus. He won't let this mate of mine that was come near him; snaps at him; snarls like the very devil if he tries to pat him on the head. That's a kind of instinct I believe in. And Lizzie's is a kind of instinct that I'd stake salvation on. But I put up with the fellow till a week ago. He wanted Lizzie to kiss him, and she wouldn't. He tried to force her, and I came upon them when she was struggling in his arms, screaming out to me for help. I helped her—and helped him; to the soundest thrashing he ever made acquaintance with. I broke with him then and there, and came away in search of you, pretty certain I should be able to find you. You're pretty well known, Tom."

"And Rhada——"

"Manthus. Out with it, Tom! It'll come as easy as butter soon."

"Where is he?"

"Outside in the bush, a couple of hundreds yards away, keeping watch over the wheelbarrow. I want to start right away; we'll have to be careful that we're not followed."

"I'm ready this minute, Bill," I said. "I'll just take my blankets and tools. I'll leave the tent up; it'll keep off suspicion."

I wasn't long getting ready, and Bill, lifting his little girl from the bed, held her, still asleep, tenderly to his breast, and led the way into the bush, where Rhadamanthus and the wheelbarrow were waiting for us.

Rhadamanthus, the raggedest dog that ever breathed, with the most disgraceful tail that ever wagged, fixed his eyes upon me in a kind of way that said: "Now, what sort of a chap are you?" We laid pretty little Liz in the wheelbarrow, making her snug, and covering her up warm. Her face, as she lay asleep in the wheelbarrow, had a curious effect upon me—made me choke a bit, as I'm doing now. When she was snugly tucked in, I kissed her, and a sweet and new feeling crept into my heart as once more she smiled at my kiss.

"It's a trick of hers," said Bill; "she always smiles in her sleep when any one kisses her that she likes. God bless you, Tom!"

"All right, mate," said I.

Rhadamanthus sidled up to me, and licked my hand.

We travelled the whole of that night, taking it in turns to wheel Liz, who slept soundly all the time. Rhadamanthus trudged along by our side, watching his child mistress with true affection in his eyes.

It was a beautiful starlit night, and everything about us was quiet and peaceful. The scenes through which we passed were full of strange beauty to me, who had hitherto looked upon them with a careless eye. Now and again in the distance we saw a camp-fire burning, with the diggers lying around it; and occasionally we heard the tinkling of bells on the necks of horses which stumbled about with hobbles on their feet, while their drivers were sleeping between the shafts of the wagons, walled round with canvas, on beds of dry leaves.

We kept out of the track of men as much as we could, and met with no obstacles on the road that we did not

easily overcome. We had to lift the wheelbarrow over fallen logs sometimes, and once over a creek, and we did it gently, without disturbing our little one. That walk through the solemn and levelly woods was to me very much like a prayer. When we made our way through the tall straight trees of silverbark; when I looked up at the wonderful brightness of the heavens, which filled the woods with lovely light, among which the shadows played like living things; when upon a distant hill I saw a flock of sheep asleep, with the moon shining clear upon them; and when I gazed at the peaceful and beautiful face of the child asleep in the barrow—I could scarcely believe that it was not all a dream. The remembrance of that night's tramp has never left me, and its lessons remain. Too often, mates, do we walk through life, blind to the signs.

During the day we camped, and took it in turns to sleep, and on the third night we came to the end of our journey. We had had three or four hours' heavy uphill work, but I didn't feel tired a bit. My body was as light as my heart.

"Over that range, Tom," said Bill, "and we're there."

It was the steepest of all the ranges, and took us a time getting to the top, and then, looking down, I saw a great natural basin, shut in by high cliffs. You would have thought there was no outlet from it, unless you climbed over the hills which surrounded it; but when you got down, you discovered a number of artful little turns and windings, which led to gullies and smaller basins which you could not discern from the heights.

We had to awake little Liz, as there was some danger wheeling the barrow down so steep an incline. She jumped out quite bright, and let me carry her some distance. If she had been my own child, I could not have felt more tender toward her. Presently Bill pointed out his tent, and said he should not wonder if his old mate were sleeping in it. Sure enough, when we were within six yards of the tent, he rushed out with a revolver in his hand, and fired at Rhadamanthus, who had sprung at him the moment he made his appearance.

"Lie down, Rhad!" cried Bill, pushing the dog away with his foot; "and you, Ted, drop that revolver, or I'll wring your neck for you!"

Almost on the words, Bill leaped at the fellow, wrested the revolver from his hand, and sent him spinning a dozen yards away. It was not done a moment too soon, for I believe he was about to fire on us. He was a desperate-looking fellow, was Teddy the Tyler. A white-faced, white-livered, flat-footed bully. I heard some queer stories about him afterward.

"You murdering villain, you!" said Bill, as Teddy the Tyler rose from the ground with an evil look, and tightened his belt. "Do you know you might have shot my little girl?"

Little Liz was clinging to her father, trembling in every limb.

"A good job if I had," muttered Teddy the Tyler.

Bill strode quickly up to him, and seizing him by the collar, forced him to the ground by dint of sheer muscular strength.

"If ever again you raise your hand," he said, between his clenched teeth, "against me, or my little girl, or my mate, or my dog—if you as much as lift your finger against them, say good-by to the world. I'll break your infernal back for you, as sure as the Lord's in heaven!"

"What do you bring loafers into the gully for?" growled Teddy.

"That's my business," answered Bill. "I discovered this place, and I've a right to bring a friend. This is my mate now. Call him a loafer again, and I'll knock your ugly teeth down your throat; keep a civil tongue in your head, and I'll not interfere with you. I make you a present of this gully, every inch of it." Teddy's face brightened. "I know where there's a richer one—ah, you may stare, but you'll not put your foot in it. To-morrow I shall take my tent away, and you can work here till you rot, if you like. I don't think you're fool enough to get the place rush-

ed, for that would put an end to your little game. Pick up the revolver, Tom, and stick it in your belt. It's mine. And throw out of the tent everything that belongs to the thief."

I carried his blankets and clothes out to him, and threw them at his feet.

"There's something else in there belonging to me," he said. "My neckerchief."

I found it, and flung it to him—a bright-colored neckerchief, which he slung about his neck sailor fashion. The light of the moon shone upon it, and I noticed particularly the combination of bright colors in which it was woven.

As he gathered up his things he had a parting word to say, and he spit it out with foam about his lips, like the hound he was.

"I'll make this the worst night's work you have ever done! You shall cry blood for the way you've served me! By this, and this, I swear it!"

He wiped the foam from his mouth, and flicking it to the ground with a snap of his fingers, walked slowly away.

We took no further notice of him, but, putting the chain on Rhadamanthus, we went into the tent, and lay down till morning.

We were up with the lark, and out. As we passed along the gully, I noticed that Teddy the Tyler had put up a sort of mimi, and that he was asleep under it.

"Now, then, Tom," said my mate, "I'll show you something that will open your eyes. That fool there knows nothing about it. I discovered the place three weeks ago, and held my tongue, having my doubts of him."

Coming to the end of the gully, we walked over a pretty considerable rise in the land, Bill leading the way through more than one heavy clump of timber on the other side. We might have walked half a mile through thick clusters of trees, when Bill clapped his hand upon my eyes, and told me to close them. We might have walked a hundred yards farther, when he took his hand away, saying we were there.

It was a strange-looking spot, completely hidden by wood-growth—a piece of land that appeared to have been scooped out of the hills, in the exact shape of a saddle.

"Look around you," said Bill; "see the hills, every one of them, shelving down into this hollow. Look at the veins of quartz—auriferous, every bit of it—all running down to one point. Here's a piece of the stone"—picking it up—"with gold in it. Here's another, with more gold in it. That's evidence. Now take your fossicking knife, and dig up some of the earth at the trunk of that tree with the large spreading roots. Dig into the roots. I thought as much. You can see the gold in it without spectacles. The stuff there'll yield an ounce to the tin dish. Why is the gold dust at this spot? Because it has slid down the hights with the rains, and the roots of that tree have caught some of it in its descent, and held it fast in crevices. This hollow beneath us contains all the gold that has been washed for ages off these golden hills, and it is all ours—all ours, every ounce of it!"

He was on the ground, showing me proof of his theory in small lumps of gold that he dug out here and there.

"Tom, kneel down here by my side, and I'll tell you why I worship it."

He held it in the palm of his hand, and gazed with glowing eyes upon it.

"I see this educating her; I see this making her fit to hold her own with the best lady in the land; I see it bring smiles to her lips, roses to her cheeks; I see her doing good with it; I see her, the light of my days, removed from the hard trials that make life so sad to many; I see life-long joy and happiness in it for my pretty Liz—my pretty, pretty Liz!"

He let the gold fall to the ground, and hid his face in his hands. I understood then how perfect love can be.

We returned to the old gully, and carried away our tent and all that belonged to us. Before night we had our fire-place built, and our tent fixed in a spot where it would be secure from floods. The next day we set to work.

Bill was a true prophet. The hollow was heavy with gold. We did not find a regular gutter of it, though Bill said if we sunk deep we should be sure to come upon one; but within a few feet of the surface, and sometimes almost on the surface, we lighted upon rich pockets of gold. Talk of jewelers' shops! This dirty hollow took the shine out of all of them. And as day after day went away, and our bags of gold got heavier and heavier, we laid plans for the future. We were to go home and buy a farm; Liz was to be educated and grow into a beautiful young woman and get married, and we were all to live together and take care of the children. How the little one laughed when we came to this part of the story! For we spoke freely before her; it was all settled, and certain to come true. Those five weeks that we lived together were the happiest of my life. Liz was like a star in our tent, and made everything bright and beautiful. We all worshiped her—Bill, me, and Rhadamanthus—and lived in her, so to speak. The tricks she played, the stories she had to tell, the discoveries she had made, gladdened the days, and drew our hearts closer and closer to her.

One day she saw a rock exactly the shape of a goat's face, and we had to go with her and christen it "Goat's Rock;" another day she picked up a beautiful crystal, which she declared was a charm to keep everything bad away; another day she found a new wild flower, which she prattled over in the quaintest and prettiest fashion; another day she discovered that Radamanthus was a fairy who had changed himself into a dog to take care of her. The faithful, ragged beast! She announced the amazing discovery to him in the most impressive manner, kneeling before him, and putting his paws on her shoulders, the while he looked into her face, and blinked in confirmation.

A baize partition separated the compartment in which she slept from ours, and one night, when I heard her, before going to bed, lisping her prayer that God would bless her dear father, and dear Tom, and Rhad, my thoughts went back to the time when I, too, prayed before I went to sleep. On Sundays we would take a walk, and Bill, in the evening, would read a chapter from a Bible he had—which him, nor I, nor Rhad, would ever have thought of but for our dear little angel. Those Sundays, with Bill, and the little girl, and the ragged, faithful dog, are never out of my mind. I wish I had always spent my Sundays in the same way.

During this time we had only seen Teddy the Tyler once. About a fortnight after we had started working, he strolled upon us. A tin dish with nearly a pound of gold in it was lying on the ground, and he threw a wofully covetous look at it. He had his pick and shovel hanging over his shoulder, and walking past us, he stuck his pick in the ground, and rolled up his shirt-sleeves.

Bill, following him, took the pick and shovel, and pitched them a dozen yards off.

"I told you you shouldn't come into this gully," said he.

"It's as much mine as yours," replied Teddy the Tyler.

"I mean to fight for it, at all events."

"That's fairly spoken," said Bill. "Fight you shall have, and if you whip me, we'll give you this gully, and get another. Tom, come and see fair play."

To it they went. But Teddy might as well have stood up against a rock as against my mate. Bill was the strongest man I ever knew, and he gave Teddy such an awful thrashing that he threw up his arms in less than a quarter of an hour.

"Had enough, mate?" asked Bill.

Teddy shouldered his pick, and strode away without a word, throwing a devil's look behind him as he went.

"He'd murder the lot of us, Bill," I said, "if we gave him the chance."

"Dare say," said Bill; "we won't give it to him."

In eleven weeks we got eleven hundred ounces of gold, and then a thing happened which makes my blood turn cold to speak of. I started one night to get a stock of provisions. We used to start in the night so that we should not be discovered, and when we made our appearance at the cattle station early in the morning for meat and flour, the people there didn't suspect we had been traveling all the previous night.

I was pretty well the whole day returning, for I had to be cautious, to prevent being followed. Within half a mile of our gully I met Bill, with a ghost's face on him, and looking as if he had gone mad in my absence.

Running toward me, he said, wildly:

"Tom, for God's sake, answer me, quickly! Have you seen Lizzie?"

"Not since last night," I said, with an uncomfortable feeling at Bill's wild manner.

"She's lost—she's lost!" he screamed.

"Lost!"

"I've been hunting for her the whole day. Oh, my pet, my darling! if I don't find you, may the world be burned, and all that's in it!"

I was almost as mad as he was, for you know I loved the little thing as if she were my own daughter.

"Keep cool, Bill," I said, as quietly as I could, though I felt my words trembling with the trembling of my lips; "if we want to do any good, we musn't lose our wits."

"I know—I know!" he said, beating his hands together; "but what am I to do—what am I to do?"

"When did you miss her?"

"This morning. I got up at daylight and left her sleeping in her crib. She was asleep, and I kissed her before I went out. I shall never kiss her again—I shall never kiss her again! Oh, my pet—my pet!"

And he broke into a passionate fit of sobbing. It was awful to see.

I waited till he was a bit calmer, and then I told him to go on.

"I came back to breakfast, and she was gone; and Rhad was off his chain, and gone too. I've been hunting for her all the day. Oh, God! tell me where she is!"

"I am glad the dog was with her," I said. "How long is it since you were at the tent?"

"Not an hour ago. But all this talking won't bring her back. Let's go on searching for her. Perhaps she has climbed over the ranges, and is lost in the bush beyond."

"She could never do it, Bill; she hasn't strength enough, the dear little thing, to walk to the top of these hills. Now, Bill, I am cooler than you are, and I intend to keep cool. Although I'd give my legs and arms rather than any hurt should come to our pretty darling"—I had to hold myself tight in here, to keep myself from breaking down—"I'm not going to let my feelings run away with me. If I am to help you, I must know everything. Let us go back to the tent, and start from there. Here's my hand, Bill; I'll search for our darling till I drop."

He grasped my hand, and we ran to our tent. The first thing I did was to examine the dog's chain. It had been unlocked in the usual way, and the key was lying on the table.

"That's plain proof," I said, "that Liz herself let him loose, and took him out with her. Had she all her things on?"

"Yes; her hat and mantle were gone, and also a little basket she used to take with her, to fill with wild flowers."

"You see," I said, "she went out flower-gathering. Now, which way did she go?"

Naturally, I considered she would take the road she knew best—the one that led to the gully Bill first worked in. There was a creek on the road, pretty deep in parts, and the dreadful idea struck me that she might have fallen in. All this time Bill was behaving in the wildest manner. He took every little thing that belonged to her, and kissed

them again and again. He called her by name, as if she could hear him; cried to his dead wife, as if she were standing before him; and altogether was about as useless as a man well could be. Then, taking a chamois-leather bag filled with gold, he threw it on the ground, screaming:

"To the devil with all the gold! Devil gold—devil gold! why did I come here and lose my pet for you? Oh, Lord! take all the gold, and give me back my child!"

"Come along, Bill," I said, without appearing to heed his ravings, for that, I knew, was the best way; "I am going to the creek to look for her."

"She hasn't fallen in!" he cried. "How do you know she has fallen in? It's not true! My pet is not drowned! No—no!"

"I don't say she is drowned," I said. "God forbid that she is! Behave like a man, Bill, and keep your senses about you, or we may as well give her up altogether."

I was bound to speak in that way to him, and after a time I got him to be a little more reasonable. Then we started for the creek, calling out "Liz—Liz!" at the top of our voices, and whistling in the old familiar way to Rhadamanthus. No sound answered us, and the solemn stillness of the place, when we were not speaking, fell upon my heart like a funeral pall. We tracked the creek from one end to the other, and then I sat on the bank to consider.

"Bill," said I, "she can't be drowned, thank God! Rhad can swim, and if he couldn't have saved her, he would be somewhere about. Besides, her basket would float, and we should see some signs." And then a thought flashed into my mind. "Bill, have you been to Teddy the Tyler?"

"Great Lord! Do you think —"

"I don't think anything. Let's go and see him."

We walked to Teddy's tent, calling and listening to imaginary answers as we walked. It was late in the evening by this time, and Teddy was sitting outside his tent smoking his pipe. He barely looked up as we approached; but I noticed that he hitched close to him with his foot an axe that was lying on the ground.

"Good-evening, mate," I said, by way of commencement, though I felt more inclined to spit in his face than be civil to him.

Bill shook with excitement, and there was a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

Teddy did not reply to my "Good-evening," but sat still, smoking. He had his eye on the axe, though; I didn't miss that.

"Are you deaf?" I asked.

"No," he snapped. "Are you?"

"Look here, mate," I said.

"And look *you* here, mate," he interrupted; "I don't want any of your 'Good-evenings' or any of your company. What are you loafing in my gully for! I'll split your skull open if you stop here much longer!"

"We've come here for a purpose," I said; "I am going to ask you a question or two—that you'll have to answer, my lad, if you wish ever to answer another."

"You can ask a thousand," said Teddy. "Fire away. You won't get me to answer one."

"We shall see. We are in search of little Liz. She hasn't been home all day. Have you seen her?"

Teddy gave us both a sharp, quick look, and did not answer. Bill never took his eyes from Teddy's face.

"Have you seen our Liz?" I repeated. "Has she been here to-day?"

Still no answer.

Without any warning, Bill made a spring at him; but Teddy was on his legs like lightning, brandishing the axe over his head. Bill avoided the blow, catching the handle on his arm, and, closing with Teddy, had him on the ground in no time, with his knee on his chest, and his hand at his throat.

"Hold off!" Teddy choked out. "Take this madman off or he'll throttle me!"

"Answer that question," said Bill, with set teeth; "if you don't I'll kill you!"

"She hasn't been here to-day," the fellow gasped.

"Have you seen her anywhere, you devil?"

"No," was the sullen reply.

"You may get up," said Bill, rising. "Let me find that you are lying and I'll tear your heart out! Mark me, Teddy the Tyler! If I discover that you have seen my child to-day, and have been telling us lies, you shall do what you threatened I should do, and what I am doing, God help me! You shall cry blood. Come away, Tom; the sight of him turns me sick."

We had a weary night of it. We searched in every likely place; we lighted fires on every rise, so that they might catch the child's eye, if she

were anywhere near; but when the morning came, we were as far off finding her as ever. What puzzled me most was the absence of Rhadamanthus. We could find no trace of him. If anything had happened to the child, I thought, the dog's instinct would surely have led him home to the tent. We trudged back, sore and disheartened. We had not eaten a morsel the whole night. Bill, I believe, had not put food to his lips since he first missed little Liz. He hadn't even smoked a pipe. I was thinking to myself, what shall we do next? when my mate, who had thrown himself on the ground, whispered to it in a voice so low that he seemed to be afraid of my hearing him:

"The old shafts—the deserted shafts—we haven't looked there for her."

The idea that our little girl might be lying at the bottom of one of the deserted holes, dying perhaps, made me dizzy for a moment.

We turned out of the tent in silence, and recommenced our search; Bill trembling like a man with the palsy at every hole we stopped at. I went down myself to save him the first shock of the awful discovery, if she were lying there. But I discovered nothing.

"Let's go to the old gully again," said Bill.

The sun was rising over the hills, bathing them in seas of gold and purple, and the laughing jackass was waking everything up with its gurgling laughter. Teddy the Tyler was not out of bed, and I went down the shaft he was then working. The noise disturbed him and he came from his tent, half dressed, and with a death-like scare on his face, asked us what we were up to now.

"It's only fair to tell him," said Bill. "We're looking for my child. She might have tumbled down a shaft, you see."

We searched every hole in the gully without result, and then we went away.

And now, mates, something happened that I have thought of over and over again with wonder. I was a better man then than I am now, for I had the impression of those peaceful and happy Sundays, with the readings out of the Bible, and the quiet walks with little Liz full upon me. And I believed at that time that God Almighty had sent some little birds to assist us to the end of our search.

We had got away from Teddy's gully, fully a mile from it, and were passing a cluster of gum-trees, upon one of which half a dozen laughing jackasses were perched. As we passed they set up a chorus of mocking laughter, which so grated upon me, that I threw my stick at them, and sent them flying away. Going to pick up my stick, which had fallen some distance off, I observed an abrupt turn in the ranges, leading to a chasm in the hills which neither of us had ever trodden before. But for these birds, we should not have discovered it. I called out to Bill, and he followed me into the declivity.

"Here's a shaft sunk," I said; "some one has been prospecting."

The shaft was about twenty feet deep, and, holding on to a rope that I tied to a stump of a tree, I lowered myself down. Before I reached the bottom, I saw that our search was at an end. There lay our little Liz, with her face turned upward, as though she was sleeping. I could not distinguish her features, and indeed I was so startled that I did not pause to think or look more closely.

"Liz!" I whispered.

No answer came, and I called to her again. All was silent.

The rope to which I was clinging was not long enough to tie a slip-knot by which we could raise her. Another and a longer rope was in Bill's hands above. I climbed into the sunlight, and taking the rope from Bill, prepared to make a sling of it.

Bill allowed me to take the rope, and looked at my fear-struck face with a terrible twitching of his features. He was trying to utter words, but for a moment or two he had lost the power. With a sound that was like a shriek and a sob, he regained it.

"For the good God's sake, Tom, don't tell me she is down there!"

"She is there, Bill. No—no! What are you about?"

I flung my arms around him, to prevent him springing down the shaft.

"Bill, this is an awful moment, and Lizzie's life may hang upon our keeping steady. As you love your dear little one, don't give way yet awhile. She wants your help to raise her. Do you hear me? she wants your help."

"Ay," he replied, vacantly.

"I am going to tie this rope around her. Will you stand steady here above, and raise her, while I support her below?"

He nodded, and made motions with his lips, as though he were speaking. But no sound came from them.

"For our precious darling's sake, Bill," I said, as I prepared to descend again, "be steady, lad."

I tied the rope around her slender body—ah me—ah me! the pretty little hands that did not respond to the touch of mine—the soft face that rested on my shoulders! and slowly—slowly, we brought her to the surface, where I tenderly set her down.

She was dead! The angels had taken her from us.

As she lay with her eyes turned blindly to the sun that was smiling on the hills, and bathing them in light, I could scarcely believe that she was dead. In her innocent young face the roses were still blooming, and in her pretty little hands were grasped a few of the wild flowers she had been gathering. I stooped, and kissed her pure, fresh lips. Then I turned away, for blinding tears were in my eyes, and a darkness fell upon me.

"Oh, my darling—my darling!" I heard Bill say. "You are not dead—you can not be dead! Look at me, speak to me, my pet! Throw your arms around my neck." And he pressed her to his breast, and kissed her many times. "She is only sleeping! Feel her heart, Tom; it is beating! Feel—feel, I say!"

I placed my hand on her heart, to soothe him; alas, its pulse was stilled forever.

"Bill," I said, solemnly; for it was an awful thing was the sight of the dear angel lying dead upon the grass, "do not deceive yourself; she is dead. She has gone to a better world than this."

"Dead!" he cried, springing to his feet, and looking wildly upward. "Then strike me dead too!"

He threw himself beside her again; he clasped her in his arms, nursing and rocking her as he would have done if she had been sleeping; he called her by every endearing name; and suddenly became quite still.

"Tom," he said, presently, in a strangely quiet and eager tone, "look at this mark on my child's neck. What is it? Great God! what is it?"

I looked. It was a discolored mark, and I shuddered to think that it might have been caused by the grasp of a cruel hand. But I would not madden him utterly by a whisper of my suspicions.

"It is impossible to say what it is, Bill, without evidence."

"True," he replied, still more quietly; "without evidence. Where's Rhad?"

The absence of the dog had been puzzling me. That he would not have voluntarily deserted little Liz was as certain as fate.

"Stay here with my child," said Bill. "I am going to search for her dog. He loved my Liz, and was faithful to her. He would have laid down his life for her."

He disappeared in the bush, and within ten minutes I heard him call out that he had found Rhadamanthus. He stepped from the shadows of the trees, and placed Rhad at my feet. Poor Rhad! He was dead—shot through the heart.

"You see, Tom, he's been shot. Who did it? We want evidence. Whoever killed the dog killed my child."

I knelt and examined the dog's body. Three bullets had been fired into it, and there was something in the dog's mouth. Forcing the jaws open, I took it out, and recognized it immediately. It was a piece of the colored silk handkerchief I had thrown out of the tent to Teddy the Tyler, the first night he came to the gully. The dog had evidently torn it away in a desperate struggle, for shreds of it were sticking between his teeth so firmly that I could not drag them away.

"There has been foul play here, Bill," I said.

"I know it—I know it. What is that between his teeth? Faithful Rhad! It is part of a handkerchief. Oh, I know without your telling me! But whose handkerchief—do you hear me—whose handkerchief? Speak the name. Out with it, man!"

"Teddy the Tyler's," I said.

I had no time to add another word, for Bill was off with the speed of the wind in the direction of Teddy's gully. I hurried after him, but he was too swift for me, and I lost him. When I reached the gully, neither Teddy nor Bill was in sight, and though I searched for an hour I could see nothing of them. Not knowing which way to turn to look for them, I hastened back to where our dear dead Liz was lying, and carried her in my arms to our tent. My first impulse was to put everything in order. I tidied up the place, and arranged our darling's bed, my scalding tears almost blinding me as I worked. Then I laid the body on it, and covered it up, all but the face, which was still bright with roses soon to fade. About her head I scattered some wild flowers growing near our tent; and on her breast I placed the Bible, our only book. This done, I went again in search of Bill, with no better success than before. I was full of fears, but was powerless to act. All I could do was to wait. My next impulse was to bring Rhad's body home. I did so, and placed it at the foot of the bed, on the ground. The hours went by, and Bill did not appear.

Noon was past, and still no sign. The sun set, and still no sign. Half a dozen times at least I went to Teddy's gully, only to find it deserted. What was I to do? What could I do? I would have gone to the cattle-station, where we purchased our food, but that I was loth to leave our darling alone. It seemed like deserting her. No; I would wait till the morning. Night coming on, I lighted a candle, and sat in the dim tent, keeping watch—for the living and the dead. It was an awful—awful time. Sounds without warned me that the weather was changing. Dark clouds were in the skies; the wind sighed and moaned. I knew the signs. A storm was coming. It came sooner than I expected, bursting upon us with frightful fury—one of the most terrible storms in my re-

membrane. The rain poured down in floods, the thunder shook the hills, the lightning played about the peaceful face of little Liz, and cast a lurid glare upon the flowers and the Bible on her breast. I knelt by the side of the bed and prayed, keeping my face buried in the bed-clothes, and holding the dead child's cold fingers in mine. I may have knelt thus for an hour, and the storm raged on without abatement. Then I raised my head. My heart leaped into my throat. At the door stood my mate Bill, haggard and white, with blood oozing from between the fingers which he pressed upon his heart. It was but a vision, and it lasted but a moment; but so terrible an impression did it leave upon me, that I ran into the open air for relief. And in that moment a voice fell on my ears:

"Liz! My pet! My darling!"

The voice of a dying man.

But the darkness was so thick that I could not see my hand before me.

"Bill!" I cried, "where are you?"

I received an awful answer. A hand stretched itself from out the darkness, and, clutching me with a strength so fierce and resistless that I had no power to resist, forced me back into the tent. The candle was still burning, and by its light I saw my dear old mate standing before me, grasping with his other hand the lifeless body of Teddy the Tyler. Bill's hand upon my breast relaxed, and the body of the murderer slid from his grasp, and lay in a heap on the soddened ground.

"Liz!" whispered Bill. "My Liz! Life of my life! My pet!"

He saw her in her bed, and a ghastly smile of joy played about his lips. He staggered toward her, and fell down dead.

Within twenty-four hours five hundred men were in the gullies. They helped me to bury Bill and little Liz in one grave, and to put a fence around it.

My story is done.

For some time after Cornish Tom ceased speaking, there was silence in the tent. The story he had told had deeply affected the men, and their minds were occupied with thoughts of little Liz, and the tragic end of her father. But at the end of an hour, the full sense of their own danger forced itself upon them, to the exclusion of every other subject. The fire had burned itself out, and there was not a stick in the place they could use for fire-wood; the cold was intense; and their situation was growing every moment more perilous.

"Dick," said Gentleman George, "before Tom commenced his story, you fancied you heard something. What was it?"

"Men crying out," replied Dick Driver.

"Perhaps," said Cornish Tom, "the men from the next gully. What do you say, mates, to going to look for them? No one's in the humor for sleep, and the moon is rising, so that we shall be able to pick our way. Who's for it?"

They were all for it, glad of the opportunity for action. It was resolved that all but William should go, and that he should be left to take care of the tent. They calculated to be back before sunrise, when they would commence in serious earnest the task of cutting their way out of the region of snow. They took some long poles and ropes with them, and in a few moments William was alone.

Standing by the tent door, he watched his mates treading their way carefully along until they were out of sight, and then he set himself to the task of getting together the things they should need to take with them in the morning. This occupied him an hour, and then he threw himself upon his stretcher and fell into a doze. Lying thus, a strange fancy haunted him. Cries for help, sounding from afar, traveled towards the tent. These cries, growing fainter and fainter, until they died away altogether, formed part of his dreams, and it was only when they ceased, that he roused himself and listened, in doubt whether they had actually been uttered. The wind had lulled, and, hearing no sound, he dozed off again, to be again awakened by a faint cry. Yet when he went to the door, he heard no sound.

Nothing but the snow-covered peaks and hills could be seen. No sign of human life was visible, and he shuddered at the fancy that he was alone in the world, and that he would never look upon mortal face again. As this fancy grew upon him with the strength of conviction, the scene reminded him strangely of his last Christmas-eve at Warleycombe. He looked around, almost expecting to see the queer faces and the shadows of his dreaming. The hill down which the avalanche had swept was before him; the faces he had seen at Warleycombe were not there, nor the tree beneath which he had fallen asleep, but he saw—the white plain undulating! His fevered fancy peopled its surface with snow-elves and shadows, staring at him with glittering eyes and beckoning him to approach.

Like one in a dream, deprived of all control over his will, he walked toward them until he was some distance from the tent. The shadows continued to multiply in numbers and waved him onward. As he advanced toward them they retreated, but beckoning him still to come.

He seemed to be drawn forward by an invisible power, until, overcome by nervous excitement, he sunk, half insensible, to the ground.

"My life is over!" he groaned. "Hope has departed from it; love has melted out of it. The woman I adored was false?"

"No!" cried a thunderous voice; and the word was echoed and re-echoed a thousand times by the surrounding hills. Then, as at a word of command, the echoes suddenly ceased, and, like a bell-note upon the rarefied air, clear and sweet, stole another voice which smote him with mingled pain and pleasure.

"No!" it said; "the woman you loved was faithful. She is pure as the snow which may be your grave. Miserable man, you have destroyed and withered her young life. Tear from the Rose of Love the Parasite Doubt, and awake from your dream!"

The voice ceased, the shadows faded into thin air, and William arose from the ground, writhing at the possible truth contained in this delusion of his senses. He had wandered far from the tent, and he was about to turn thitherward when a dark stain on the white surface caught his eye. He moved forward, and saw, stretched upon the ground, the bodies of two men. He knelt and tried to rouse them. In vain; they were insensible, perhaps dead. The cries he had heard were real, and had proceeded from these two men. He could see plainly their pale faces in the moon-gleam; and one, bearded as it was, struck upon his memory like that of an almost forgotten friend.

One by one he dragged the men, still benumbed, to the tent, and, without success, tried by every means in his power to restore them to consciousness. He searched in their pockets for means of identification. On one he found a match-box full of gold and an empty pipe; on the other he found a pocket-book. As he knelt over him to take it from his breast and looked into his face, the same impression of an old familiar association occurred again to him, and he passed his hand across his brow in the endeavor to trace the connecting link to the fancy which enthralled him. The next moment he opened the pocket-book.

Was he dreaming still? He started to his feet, aglow with excitement, for in his hand lay the picture of Laura Harrild, with her truthful eyes directed to his face. With trembling hands he opened a letter, the characters of which were familiar to him, and with a despairing cry he dropped into a seat. All was clearly revealed. This man lying at his feet was Laura's brother. It was he to whom she was bidding farewell on Christmas-eve; and, as William read, his eyes became blurred with repentant tears. He remembered Laura's agitation on that evening as they sat within the curtained recess, when he told her the story of his friend who had forged his father's name. Now it was explained.

Some years ago, long before William was acquainted with Laura, her brother also had committed forgery, and had brought disgrace upon his father's name. Reuben Harrild never forgave his son, nor would he allow his name to be uttered in his house. To all inquiries he returned but one answer—that his son was dead; and so the years rolled on, and to all Laura's entreaties for forgiveness for her brother, Reuben Harrild turned a deaf ear. Wearied with his unsuccessful efforts to obtain his father's pardon, Arthur Harrild resolved to emigrate, and to trust to time and his own better life and repentance to heal the wound. On last Christmas-eve he bid Clara a secret farewell. Through the window of the room in which the merriment was going on he watched for the form of his father whom he had wronged, and whom he might never see again; and with good resolves in his heart bid adieu to his native land, in the hope that his future life might redeem, in his father's eyes, the wrong he had done in the past. As William read on, an agony of remorse fell upon him, and the words he had heard the shadows speak in his dreams bore a new significance. Yes, she was pure—she was true. She loved and had ever loved him faithfully. The belief brought a gleam of comfort to him in the midst of his misery.

"I have not seen him," Laura wrote in the letter, "since the night you bade me farewell. He witnessed our parting, and misconstrued it. I forgive him, dear Arthur, for you know I never spoke to him about you. Daily I reproach myself that I did not tell him: a woman should have no secrets from her lover and husband. But my heart aches sorely at the thought that he should deem me untrue."

"Forgive me, Laura," murmured William. "forgive me! And, O God! pity me for the blessing I have thrown away, and the unhappiness I have brought to her."

"If you should meet him," the letter went on, "for he has gone to the colonies, speak to him, Arthur, dear. Ask him to write to me. If he should have ceased to love me, I must bear it; but my heart is his, and I shall love him forever. Tell him all about yourself and about our parting that night, and if he is in error, undeceive him."

Then she bid God bless her brother and prosper him, and bring him home again safe and well, and prayed that he might be reunited to their father once more.

When William reached the end, he bowed his head and buried his face in his hands. He had thrown away this precious love, he had wronged

this pure girl: he had wrecked his life and hers by his unworthy suspicions. Going to the door of the tent, the drift whizzed past him in blinding particles, and the mournful wail of the wind was like a dirge for bright hopes blotted out forever.

"I shall die here," he thought, "and she will never know. Oh, shadows, that visited me on that night and this, would that I had listened and believed!"

And he fell upon his knees and raised his hands in an agony of pleading for forgiveness, while the drifting snow covered his form in a soft, white, pitiless shroud.

PART III.

CHRISTMAS AGAIN AT WARLEYCOMBE.

ANOTHER year has gone by, and it is Christmas again at Warleycombe. The curtain has dropped upon the tragedy, or, as some will have it, the comedy, of thousands of human lives, and a myriad hopes and fears have culminated, and been engulfed in the mystery which surrounds humanity.

Life-sorrows have been quieted, and ambitions set at rest since Father Christmas last smiled upon the pretty Devon lane, and a few old faces that graced Warleycombe Lodge for several successive Christmases, beaming kindly on the younger ones, are missing this year from Reuben Harrild's hospitable roof.

Laura moves among her father's guests with the quiet grace of old. She has been smitten with a great grief which may shadow all her future years, but she performs her worldly duties with tender resignation. She dwells with sorrow upon the memory of her lover, and yearns to take him to her heart again, for a nature like Laura's loves once, and loves forever.

But her sorrow lies deep. This Christmas is so like the last; the snow is on the ground, and all around is so little changed; and but for the absence of her lover, Father Time might have been standing still during the year.

The Ramages, with their domestic relations unaltered, are present at Reuben Harrild's house on this Christmas eve—Mrs. Ramage as large, and Mr. Ramage as little, as ever.

The Woys and the Wymers are also there, with the suggestion in their appearance that they must have been born very old. For them, time has certainly stood still; they have neither gained nor lost a wrinkle.

Dr. Bax is there, as genial as ever. He has not changed a whit, and, but that during the past year he has made himself more loved, Father Time would also seem to have stood still for him.

Some men never grow old; the goodness of their lives scares away wrinkles, and their faces are as pleasant to look upon in their old age as in their youth.

And Stephen Winkworth and Alice are among the guests—sad and silent sharers of the festivities. Both father and daughter show the impress of the year that has fled. A new grief seems to have fallen upon them, and Stephen's eyes are constantly wandering, apprehensively, to his daughter's face.

Laura was standing in the curtained recess where she and William sat last year. Her thoughts were dwelling sadly on that time, and as she looked out upon the unchanged scene, sorrowful tears were in her eyes.

Her father, who had been silently observing her, moved to her side, and passing his arm around her, begged her not to grieve.

"I try not to, father," she said, laying her head on her father's breast, and sobbing quietly; "but I can't help feeling unhappy at the difference between this Christmas and the last."

"I wish," muttered Reuben Harrild, "that William Fairfield had been at the bottom of the Red Sea before he had ever thought of coming to Warleycombe!"

"Do not lay all the blame upon William," said Laura; "it was chiefly my fault."

"Your fault that this man deceived you!"

"What if I deceived him first? What if I had a secret which he should have shared, and which I withheld from him? Yes," she continued, quickly, stopping the remark that Reuben Harrild was about to make, "I must tell you all. You must unseal my lips, father. If not out of love for me, in the cause of truth and justice you must let me speak freely, without reserve."

"Go on, Laura," he said, gravely; "I think I may trust you."

"You will listen to me patiently, will you not?" she asked, sweetly.

"I want to remind you of this time last year, when I came to you in your study. You would not let me speak then; but I am bolder now, and I know I am doing right. Father, I came at that time to ask your forgiveness for Arthur——"

"Laura!" He arose hastily to his feet, but Laura caught his hand, and pressed it to her lips.

Dr. Bax, passing at the moment, swiftly drew the curtains, so that they were shut from observation.

"Arthur was out in the cold the whole night, father," Laura continued. "William and I were standing where we are standing now, and I saw Arthur's shadow on the snow."

"But William did not know?" questioned Reuben Harrild, with a hot flame in his face.

"No, William did not know; that is the cause of my unhappiness. William saw Arthur's shadow, and wanted to go out to it, but I begged him to remain, fearing a discovery might be made that would distress you; and although William noticed my agitation, I dared not explain the cause, for you had enjoined silence upon me. Arthur had come to wish me good-by; he was going to the colonies the next day. It almost broke my heart to part with him, and I begged him to see me once more at midnight. I hoped that I might prevail upon you to forgive him, and I came to your study to plead for him, but you would not listen to me. Arthur watched you through the window, father, and bid you good-by in his heart; he loves you, indeed—indeed—and has never committed a fault since that which estranged you from him."

Reuben Harrild's countenance twitched convulsively, and he disengaged himself gently from Laura, and turned his face from her.

"At midnight, last Christmas eve, I wished him farewell. He bid me, if at any time you would allow me to speak of him, to give you his dear love and duty, and to tell you that all through his future life he would endeavor to atone for the one great fault of which he had been guilty. Father, think of him with love, and forgive him."

"Go on to the end, child," said Reuben Harrild, quietly.

"I have never seen William since that unhappy night. He wrote me a few words, saying that he had witnessed our meeting (of course he did not know—how should he?—that it was Arthur), and he went away believing I had deceived him. I did blame him a little at first for doubting me; but I have thought since that I was more in fault than he. I should have had no secrets from him who was to be my husband."

"And I have been the cause of all your unhappiness," Reuben Harrild said, drawing his daughter to him. "My child, if I had known——"

"You would have forgiven Arthur?" she asked, in a whisper, as she lay upon his breast.

"Yes, child. God pardon me! I would have forgiven him."

"And you forgive him now, father?"

"Fully, freely, my dear daughter," he said, pressing his lips to hers.

"I am so happy. I can bear my own sorrow better now; it seems light already. Before I go to bed to-night, I shall write to Arthur and tell him the good news."

Her grief seemed almost to pass away as she spoke, and hand-in-hand they left the recess.

"I have sometimes considered"—Doctor Bax was addressing the Woys and the Wymers, who, with other of Reuben Harrild's guests, were standing around him—"I have sometimes considered whether my experiences or yours are more full of romance——"

Mr. Wymer interrupted him in astonishment. "I beg your pardon. Did I mistake? Yes, surely! You did not say romance?"

"Yes, I did, Mr. Wymer—whether doctors or lawyers meet with more romance in their careers?"

"You amaze me, doctor!" exclaimed Mr. Wymer. "Romance in our lives."

He raised his hands and eyes, and his partners followed suit.

"Full of romance," said Doctor Bax, with a most positive air. "Ah, you may shake your head, but it is so. Were I a maker of stories, instead of a mender of bodies, I should need no incidents or characters that do not come within such an experience as yours. Have you not, by way of argument, held the strings of some such case as a poor person coming suddenly into possession of a great fortune?"

"Yes; but that is not romance; it is reality."

"Where do you get your romances from, if not from reality? Contemplate for a moment the passions, the emotions——"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Mr. Wymer; "I do not quite follow you."

"The fruition of hopes long deferred," continued Doctor Bax, not heeding the interruption, "deferred, perhaps, until the flowers they are called upon to gather lie withered in their hands. Passion is dead; the years have flown; yesterday, when they were young, they were poor; to-day, when they are old, they are rich, and what was then a garden is now a grave. Contemplate another instance where the sudden good fortune may have brought together two loving hearts——"

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Wymer, determined to stop the flow of such sentimental nonsense. "I distinctly decline to contemplate any thing of the sort. I have nothing to do with it. It does not come within the scope of the law. Loving hearts, indeed—pooh—rubbish! Yes, sir, I repeat—pooh, rubbish!"

Doctor Bax's amiability was not ruffled. He knew that there was a

vein of tenderness in the lawyer's nature, despite all his endeavors to hide it.

"You, yourself," said the little doctor, "related to me an instance of a young girl being suddenly and strangely enriched by the death of a relative in Australia who had never set eyes on her. You, yourself, told me how this child had a devoted mother, and a father, a blind musician and a composer, an artist living in his art, and drawing joy from it, and whom this wealth is likely to make famous. Is there not in this simple record sufficient material for a fine romance. Is there not——"

Mr. Wymer put his fingers in his ears.

"I can see no romance in the story. It is reality. Some realities are pleasant—some unpleasant. This happens to be a pleasant one to the persons interested, their heirs and assigns. That is all that can be said for it. Besides, what occurs in the Antipodes, where the natives walk about without any clo——"

"Ebenezer!" exclaimed Miss Wymer, in an awful voice.

"I beg your pardon. I was saying that what occurs at the Antipodes, where everything is topsy turvy, scarcely comes within the region of fair argument. I have heard of the most astonishing occurrences there—most astonishing!"

"Truly," remarked Doctor Bax, "wonderful things take place there—very dreadful things too. I read in the papers a few days ago that at some gold-fields discovered in New Zealand, forty men were found perishing in the snow, and that most of them died from the long exposure and the trials they had gone through. What is the matter, Laura?"

Her trembling limbs would scarcely support her as she tottered out of the room to the street door. How cruelly, bitterly like to last year every thing was outwardly! Upon this spot William had kissed her, and bid her good-night; and she might never see him again. What had Doctor Bax said? "Forty men perishing in the snow!" Her brother or her lover might be among these men. There was horror in the thought, and a faintness came upon her. In truth, she did faint dead in the arms of Doctor Bax, who had followed her into the passage.

"Poor dear! poor dear!" exclaimed the doctor, gazing at the white face lying on his shoulder. "It is a sad Christmas for you, my poor Laura! Come, cheer up, my dear," he said, as she opened her eyes; "we can't have you fainting away like this. Idiot that I am! I might have known——"

"You know nothing more, doctor? He is not among them?"

"Not he, indeed, the misguided young man! Come, now, you are better; the color's returning to your face. That's right—that's right."

"I am well, now, doctor. It was very foolish to give way, but," with a pitiful quivering of the lips, "I am not as strong as I was. Go inside, dear doctor. Don't let me make everybody miserable this Christmas eve. Very well; if you will not go in without me, I suppose I must accompany you."

Smiling almost cheerfully, she took the doctor's arm and rejoined the guests. They were happy enough, especially the very young people of the party, who laughed and frolicked as though life from this night forth was to be nothing but a long holiday.

But there was one present who was supremely unhappy. It was worse than death to Stephen Winkworth to look upon the form of his crippled child. His misery was complete, for no ray of hope fell on the heart that was cold to all but this child. Day by day he had seen her wasting away. She bore her lot uncomplainingly, and in silence. In this lay his chief unhappiness. If she had confided in him as of old—if she had complained to him of her sufferings—it would have afforded him some consolation. But no; the bond that had united them was loosened. She choose rather to suffer in silence than seek his sympathy. Hapless indeed is that mortal whose life is passed without the light of sympathy and love!

He had watched his daughter the whole of the night. Scarcely a word had passed her lips; not once had he seen her smile; not once had she looked toward him with affection. He could endure it no longer.

"Alice," he said, in a hoarse whisper, leaning over her chair, "I wish to speak with you alone."

Without a word she arose to obey him. It was a strange fashion of hers that she should wear her hair loosely; and, as it hung down in heavy masses, it almost concealed her deformity when she was standing in repose.

"Come into the night," he said.

He felt stifled in the house, and he experienced a sense of relief when he reached the garden walk that bordered Warleycorabe Lodge. The girl stood patiently before him, uttering no word.

"Alice," he said, "why do you not speak to me?"

"What shall I say, father?" she asked, in a weary tone.

"Say," he returned, with heaving breast; "say anything! Why do you avoid my look? Why do you torture me with your silence?"

The suffering tone in which he spoke was not without its effect. A

softer light came into her face—a light in which compassion dwelt for him and for herself.

"Father," she said, solemnly, taking his hand, "look up to the stars. Look out upon this scene. Not in my dreams have I seen a grander picture. The Divine Lord, that shaped the world, that gave us eyes to see, and ears to hear, and mind to understand, is looking down upon us now. See! the earth is so pure—the trees so lovely—the sky so bright! If Heaven be as beautiful as this, how blest is immortality!"

"Well, child?" he said, awed into a quieter mood.

"Well, father," she returned, "we are sent into this world to enjoy its blessings. We are here, not to repine, not to murmur, not to scatter seeds of unkindness, but to live and be grateful. If any of us has sorrow to bear, it must be borne. My lot, Heaven help me, is hard enough."

"It is, child—it is," he groaned, remorsefully.

"Why do you make it harder?"

"Alice!"

"You have asked me to speak, and there is that in my mind must be said. If it grieve you, you have brought it on yourself. My heart cries out against you! I can not help it—I can not help it—it is a power within that moves me. Since last Christmas a new light has shone upon me. Father!" she exclaimed, turning her face suddenly to his, "you have never in all your life spoken to me of my mother!"

Stephen staggered, as though a bullet had struck his heart, and a deadly shudder passed through him.

"I never saw her—I never saw her picture. I have often wondered if I shall know her when I meet her in heaven, or if there is something that will shut me out from her love in the next world, as death has done in this. Father, speak to me of my mother!"

"I can not, child—I can not," he murmured, hiding his face in his hands.

"I so yearn for love—for human love—for love with light in it! It seems to me that I can no longer live without it. Your love—forgive, oh, forgive me!" and she wound her arms around his neck, and drew his face to her bosom, "your love hurts me. It appears to me unholy, for you take it from all others to bestow it upon me. Do you think that, when I see the want of sympathy that exists between you and all around you, I am not grieved? Do you think I do not suffer when I see good men and women smile upon each other, and not upon you? When you shut yourself out from man's good-will, you shut me out also. Your life is not a blessing, father—Heaven pardon me for saying so—it is a curse?"

It was part of his bitter punishment to be compelled to acknowledge the truth of her words. His life *was* a curse, blighting every thing with which he came in contact—blighting even his child's happiness.

"Alter it, father—alter it!" she continued, earnestly. "Think better of the world. Live in it and be of it. Forget what I told you last year of my—my love for William Fairfield. Nay, do not touch me for a moment!" She shrunk from him and hid her face, and did not speak for a little while. "I have conquered that love; and I pray with all my heart that William may come back and make Laura happy. I have been silent to you. I have not been what I was; for my heart has whispered to me that you were in some way the cause of parting William and Laura. I do not ask you to tell me anything; but if you can remedy any wrong you have done, do so at once, if not for her sake, for mine!"

There was such anguish in his face, that she took his hand and held it to comfort him.

"I strove to bring love into your life, Alice," he murmured, humbly.

"You can do so yet. You can make my life brighter if you will give me the happiness of seeing that men respect you. You can bring a light into it that has never yet illumined it, if you will speak to me of my mother in such tones as a daughter may listen to."

"Child," he answered, in agony, "I can not speak of her. She made me what I am."

"How long has she been dead? It must be a long, long time; for she has been dead to me all my life. In what way did she wrong you?"

"Silence, daughter!" he cried. "You must not question me!"

"I dare not now be silent," she said, firmly. "If she wronged you, have you never, never forgiven her? It is awful to think that she has been dead all these years, and that the ashes of your anger are still burning! Bless me, father, in my mother's name, and say that you forgive her!"

She knelt upon the snow, and raised her hands in an agony of pleading. Could he gaze upon the poor, maimed child, whose life he had wrecked, and not relent? Slowly the tears came into his eyes, slowly the flood-gates of his heart were opened, and the memory of happier times—of times when he was a better man—stole upon him with softening influence. Blurred in the moonlight, he saw the form of his daughter before him, and, placing his hand upon her head, he said:

"For your sake, my child, I forgive! In your mother's name, I bless you!"

* * * * *

There was certainly something very extraordinary the matter with little Doctor Bax. He had been called away from the house some time since, and having been absent for nearly an hour, had just returned; and when Laura, who, struggling to forget her sorrow, was playing forfeits with the young people, raised her eyes, she observed him regarding her in the strangest and most inexplicable manner. The moment their eyes met he turned his away; but presently he was looking at her again, and so strangely, that she could not avoid asking if anything ailed him.

"No, my dear," he replied, with singular eagerness, "there is nothing the matter with me, you little puss, eh?"

"I don't know," said Laura; "but you look as if——"

"Yes, my dear, as if——"

"As if you had seen a ghost."

"Ha—ha!" exclaimed the doctor, laughing so loudly that all eyes were turned upon him immediately. "That's as good a thing as I've heard for years. A ghost! What do you think, Mr. Harrild? Do I look to you as if I had seen a ghost?"

"I don't believe in ghosts," replied Reuben Harrild, smiling.

"Ha!" said Doctor Bax, taking Laura's hand, and patting it gently. "You don't believe in ghosts. Now, that's singular. I do; I see them often."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Wymer, staring hard at the little doctor. "I hope there is nothing wrong here," touching his forehead.

"Not at all. I say again, I am a believer in ghosts. I never pass a church-yard at night without seeing a hundred of them, dodging around the tombstones. I do believe that if I went outside at this moment I should pop upon a ghost, or a ghost would pop upon me, to a certainty. I am pop-sure I could raise one."

"So many pops!" murmured Mr. Ramage.

"May I venture to ask," said Mr. Wymer, with a glance at his partners which implied: Be prepared to receive evidence; something may come of this, "what kind of a ghost you would raise? for there are varieties, I suppose."

"Oh, yes," said Doctor Bax, with a chuckle, "there are varieties. The ghost jocular and the ghost dejected: the dolesome and the sprightly; the sober and the rakish."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Wymer, somewhat scandalized at this levity.

"Beg away, my dear sir; I am in the humor to forgive anything. But to please you, I will be more serious." He led his friends to the window. "I am a creature of impulse, my dear Mr. Wymer; one moment I am gay, the next I am sad."

"Sanguineous temperament," suggested the lawyer.

"Precisely so. Therefore I will not ask you, nor you, friend Harrild, nor you, my dear Laura, to excuse the changeful vapors of my varying mood. That sounds rather poetic, Mr. Wymer."

"I can not say. Poetry does not come within the legitimate scope of my duties."

"You are mistaken, sir; your life contains much poetry. But as I was saying, I will not ask you to excuse me for wandering to personal experience—an episode in our family history. My father—it is forty years since he died—had a brother Frank, from whom, years before his death, he parted in anger, and whom he never saw again. Upon his death bed the thought of that brother troubled him greatly. I was not very old at the time, but I remember well his words. 'If I could but see Frank!' he murmured; 'we have had so many happy days together. We slept together, and went to school together. He loved me, I am sure. If I could but see my brother Frank!' And he turned to me, and bid me solemnly never to nurse anger against mortal man. 'Your uncle and I quarreled,' he said, 'and parted with unforgiving words. If I could see him now, and press his hand, and exchange a loving word, I should die happy.' I have never forgotten his words, and through all my life I have never let the sun go down upon my wrath."

Doctor Bax still held Laura's hand, and did not appear to heed the curiously inquiring look Reuben Harrild cast upon him.

"There are mysteries and miseries in all families," the doctor continued. "It is wonderful the suffering man inflicts upon himself. Reuben, you had a son——"

Laura held her breath.

"Yes, I had a son," said Reuben, gently. "Go on, doctor."

"A son whom you have not seen for years. You parted from him in anger. He went abroad. What if he should be dead——"

"No—no, Doctor Bax!" cried Laura. "Do not say that! For mercy's sake, do not say that!"

"What if he should be dead?" said Doctor Bax, firmly. "What if he should have died, unforgiven! If it were so, Reuben, would you not give all you possess to be able to take him once more to your heart; as you used to do in the old days, when he was a curly-headed boy?"

"I would, Heaven help me!"

"Dear friend, give me your hand. Laura, your brother was here last Christmas, was he not?"

"Yes," sighed Laura, "he was here."

"And from this window you saw his shadow on the snow," said Doctor Bax, waving his handkerchief across the window.

"I did. Look, doctor, look!" Laura gasped, for at this moment the shadow of a man darkened the snow plain without.

"Keep up your courage, Laura. Do not tremble so, my dear. Reuben Harrild, if that were your son, come to ask his father's pardon for a fault committed in a moment of rashness, and deeply repented of—if, rescued almost miraculously from a dreadful death, he should have traveled back over stormy seas to the home of his youth, humble, contrite, purified——"

"It is he—my Arthur!" cried Reuben Harrild, as the shadow advanced. "I am very—very thankful. Dear friend, you have made me your debtor for life. Come, Laura, let us welcome your brother."

"Upon my word," said little Doctor Bax, as Laura and her father left the room, "this promises to be the most glorious Christmas-eve in my remembrance."

In his excited state, a desperate step was clearly necessary.

There were two musicians present—a pianist and a fiddler. Giving them a hurried order, Doctor Bax capered up to Miss Wymer, and asked for the honor of her hand for a quadrille.

Miss Wymer solemnly rose, and granted it to him; and in a moment, before anybody knew how it had all come about, everybody paired off, sets were formed, and a general quadrille commenced—a joyous and riotous quadrille. Those who couldn't dance in the room, danced in the passages; those who couldn't dance in the middle of the floor, danced in nooks and corners; the very kitchen was invaded.

And every figure was encored by the little doctor, and danced twice over.

In his set were Miss Wymer and himself, tops; Mr. Wymer and Mrs. Ramage, bottoms; Mr. Woy and a very little girl in a blue sash, and Mr. Ramage and a pretty young lady, sides.

To say that everybody enjoyed the dance is to say little. As for Doctor Bax and Miss Wymer, the simple word Flirtation conveys no idea of their goings-on. The familiar, not to say profligate, way in which the doctor clasped the spinster's waist, and kept it there unnecessarily while the sides were performing their figures, she not objecting, but seeming to enjoy it, was a sight not to be forgotten.

Sure such another quadrille was never danced before. It came too soon to an end—that was the general opinion. When it was over, Mr. Wymer offered his bony fingers to Doctor Bax, and they shook hands cordially.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Wymer," said the doctor. "Your opinion about ghosts, now?"

"Doctor Bax," replied Mr. Wymer, with an expression which made his face look absolutely young, "allow me to say that every member of our firm is proud of your friendship. You are a most wonderful man, sir."

"You're another!" cried Dr. Bax, poking Mr. Wymer in the ribs.

Laura was weeping on her brother's breast, while Reuben stood close, holding his son's hand.

"Dear sister," said Arthur, "but for your sweet counsel this happy reunion might never have been. Do not weep, Laura; there is a great blessing in store for you."

"Arthur," she cried, stretching forth her trembling arms, "you did not come home alone?"

"No: a friend accompanied me whom I have learned to love—a friend who, on the long voyage home, spoke and thought of nothing but the wrong he had inflicted upon the girl of his heart. He saved my life, dear; but for him I should have perished in the wilds; and he has come with me to ask your forgiveness. You will forgive him, will you not? He loves you perfectly, Laura, and has been very unhappy. Thank God! thank God! this moment recompenses for all!"

At her feet knelt William Fairfield! She raised him to her breast; and on that blessed Christmas-eve, under the solemn splendor of the starlit heavens, the lovers were reunited, never more to part in life.

* * * * *

It was later than usual before the Christmas party broke up. A happier company had certainly never assembled within four walls. There was gladness around all, and every one appeared to have grown suddenly younger. Even Stephen Winkworth's countenance wore a satisfied expression, and, much to the astonishment of the guests, he was observed to smile upon two distinct occasions.

"Where is your skeleton now, Doctor Bax?" asked Laura, as she, William, and Alice stood by his side; "the skeleton you were grumbling at last year?"

"Gone, my dear!" replied the good doctor, gayly; "hiding somewhere

that I may not get at him. Ah, William! before you sleep to-night, fall upon your knees and thank God for the good he has bestowed upon you! As for you, my dear, if I were not an old man, I would run away with you, willy nilly and marry you to-morrow. But as it is, I suppose we must make the best of our lots, and go on in the same humdrum way as ever. Stephen Winkworth," he said, as Stephen approached, "will you let William have back his farm?"

"Yes," said Stephen, with a tremor in his voice as his daughter kissed his hand; "I have been wanting to offer it back, but I did not know how to do it."

"Then everything is settled," said Doctor Bax; "and, excepting that we are all very much happier, this Christmas might be last Christmas, and the year that has passed might have been a mistake. A mistake, however," he added, gently, "which will not, let us hope, be set down to our disadvantage when our life's account is balanced in the ledger of old Father Time."

His dog cart was at the door, ready to take him on his regular Christmas visit to his poor friends. How he got into his overcoat is a mystery, for everybody at once tried to assist him on with it, and the result was laughing confusion. Laura's fair hands tied his cravat round his throat, and Laura's lips were pressed to his cheek.

A most inexplicable hush fell upon the guests, who were all hatted and cloaked and bemuffled, and who yet made no stir to leave. Mr. Wymer looked at Doctor Bax and fidgeted in the strangest manner—which brought soft twinkles into the doctor's eyes.

"I beg your pardon," said the lawyer, nervously, "have you not forgotten something?"

"Possibly—possibly, my dear sir. Can you give it a name?"

"Your bag—for the poor!"

With beaming face and tearful eyes, Doctor Bax produced it magically. No wizard, whether of the east, north, south or west, could have done the trick more neatly, for not a soul was able to discover where the bag came from. He opened its mouth and held it out. No need to ask or urge. Willing hands and hearts contributed, and Doctor Bax was ready to declare most solemnly that the paper packet which Miss Wymer dropped into the bag contained more than the usual lawyer's fee of six-and-eight-pence. But had he done so, Miss Wymer would probably have declared that she had made a mistake. So he wisely held his tongue.

"Do you not find it lonely," suggested Mr. Wymer, "driving by yourself in the cold air?"

"I might do so to-night," said Doctor Bax; "I confess I should appreciate the company of a kindred soul to whom I could talk as I drive along to my friends. William, of course, can't come."

William laughed, and shook his head.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Wymer twitching a button off his glove; "if I might be allowed to—"

Doctor Bax held out his arm, and Mr. Wymer sedately accepted it, though he was so long and the doctor was so short that they formed a queer conjunction, and they walked to the dog-cart together.

The doctor waved his hand and drove off; Mr. Wymer being compelled to hold on tightly, for the pony was in the maddest of humors, and kicked up his heels in rare fashion.

An hour afterward, Laura and William were standing at the door, looking out upon the night. He told her of his dream on last Christmas eve, and was pointing out to her the spot where he had seen the shadows.

"They have taught me a lesson I shall never forget, darling," he said. "My love, strengthened by faith, can never yield again to doubt. Tell me once more, Laura, that you forgive me for the sorrow I have caused you."

"I have nothing to forgive," she said, sweetly: "I am so perfectly happy. The sorrow of the past year was hard to bear, but its fruits will be sweet. And, oh, William, I shall never think with any other feeling than gratitude of the Shadows you saw last Christmas on the Snow!"

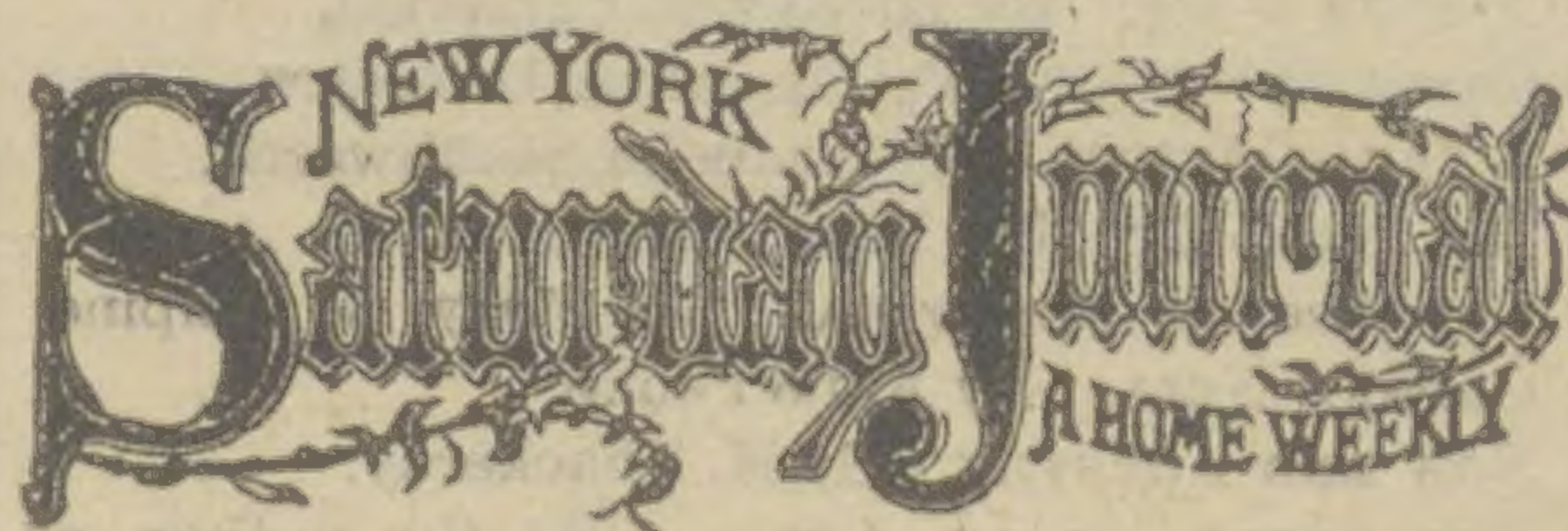
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